

“MAD MARY SANE” AND OTHER STORIES

Amanda Sullivan Myers

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2006

APPROVED:

Barbara Rodman, Major Professor

John Tait, Committee Member

Jacqueline Foertsch, Committee Member

James Tanner, Chair of the Department of
English

Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B.

Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

Myers, Amanda Sullivan, "Mad Mary Sane" and Other Stories. Master of Arts (English – Creative Writing), May 2006, 89 pp., references, 2 titles.

The following is a multi-genre collection, including short shorts, short fiction, non-fiction, and drama. Each piece utilizes Gothic motifs and dark comedy in an effort to explore life and loss.

Dedicated to:

My mother for bringing me into this world,

my father for guiding me through it and

Debby for giving me back what I lost.

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PART I
CRITICAL PREFACE

Progress on Paper

When considering this collection, *Mad Mary Sane and Other Stories*, I have found that it, simply put, is a map of the progression of my work, experiences with literature and abilities to express myself through writing. While I feel that these pieces are good representations of my personal style and interests when it comes to subject matter, I also find that the stories change dramatically from the beginning of the collection to the end, both in style, density and my ability to more clearly express characters and setting. I chose *Mad Mary Sane* as the title story for two reasons. First, it is more than difficult to create a title for a collection whose contents are so varied. Second, when *writing Mad Mary Sane*, I began with the title. I found that the letters in my name could be rearranged to spell Mad Mary Sane and I thought it was catchy. Soon after deciding to try it for a title, the story just appeared in my mind. While it is fairly short, the concept came together at a much faster rate than the rest of my pieces. Therefore, not only is this piece based significantly on personal details but it also represents the creative process for me. It shows how a whole world can come from one tiny detail, which is what I find most fascinating about writing fiction.

Before discussing the pieces themselves, I must point out a few common threads that run through all of my work. As far as style and subject matter are concerned, my writing tends toward the gothic and surreal. Taking this into consideration, it is no big surprise that Edgar Allen Poe is a very influential writer for me. I am first and foremost attracted to Poe's ability to create amazingly large stories in such short forms. He is no doubt a master of the short story format and I consistently strive to meet the standards he has created for the genre. Second, I am drawn to Poe's mastery of language and metaphor. Finally, Poe's stories have had an immense impact on me personally and on my writing due to their subject matter. Poe's precise ability to

capture death, loss, violence, greed, and all things dark has always provided an outlet for my own emotions. Therefore, most of my writing addresses death in some form or fashion, whether it is an actual death or the affects of grief. Loss runs through most of my early work because I had experienced my fare share personally; but my later work tends to incorporate the idea that loss provides an opportunity for growth, knowledge or rebirth. While my subject matter often remains dark, I appreciate and attempt to incorporate elements of humor and dark comedy in order to balance the general negativity that lurks behind most of my pieces. I also feel the necessity to include comedy because while I may ponder the black recesses of humanity, I never lose my sense of humor and ability to step back and appreciate the absurdity of our existence. I have had to learn to give my readers that opportunity through comedic releases within the text.

The first piece in the collection, *LifeLines*, offers a very good overview of my general style and humor. I chose to open the collection with this piece for a number of reasons. As previously stated, this piece is representative of my overall style and subject matter. It presents an airline stewardess, Padme (her name comes from a meditation chant), who is accompanying the reader on a flight to their next life. I find great absurdity in any attempt to make claims on what happens after one dies, and *LifeLines* illustrates my lightheartedness when it comes to the afterlife. This piece was also chosen for the opening story because it is a short-short, a medium I enjoy writing in. I feel that writing a two to three page story is very similar to writing poetry. Every sentence must be necessary and a writer must include all necessary information for the reader to become invested in such a short piece. In short, by beginning the collection with *LifeLines*, I am able to give the reader an instant shock to their perceptions and request that they remain open minded for the remaining stories.

The Genealogy of Rust and *Mad Mary Sane* are both very similar in the way they were created. These stories are representative of a period of my writing when I focused on one small story or theme or idea and built the rest of the piece around it. I rarely create a title for a piece before it is written, except for *Mad Mary Sane*. I rearranged the letters in my own name and thus the title was born. I had been planning to write a character study of an insane person, similar to Gilman's *Yellow Wallpaper* or Poe's *Tell-Tale Heart*. I pared that with the name and got a very short, slice of life piece that like Gilman and Poe's stories, represents the moment of change or the crossing over into insanity. *The Genealogy of Rust* was similarly spontaneous. After hearing a friend's urban legend account about a cousin and his grandmother in Mexico who practiced Santeria. The story included the image of a rooster crowing the woman's name; I became fixated on that detail and attempted to build a family-based story around it. This piece also questions sanity and perceived sanity by presenting Santeria rituals and a mother figure who bounces between the dark forces and drug and alcohol dependency. This piece lacks enough back-story to fully connect the reader with the main character's plight mainly due to the fact that I focused so intently on the ritual scenes. This story, among others enabled me to identify the fact that I must consider character and point of view first in order to provide a foundation and structure to the rest of the story. This need for character development may be what attracts me to short-shorts and slice-of-life pieces. But, I ultimately wanted to write longer stories and learned fairly quickly what lack of character development can do to a story. While the story lacks in development, it ultimately represents the direction my writing was headed. Familial based stories had always captured my attention and interest, but I often attempted to hide behind my characters as opposed to writing non-fiction to express my true views about family. I decided to attempt some creative non-fiction pieces in order to get a better grasp on voice and character development. If I can't

explain myself and what happened to me, how can I create a believable false world for my characters?

The best result of many non-fiction attempts is *Ghosts in the Family Tree*. This story centers around my mother's death and is the non-fictional backbone of most of my fictional stories. Poe also attempts to define and illustrate loss in his stories, perhaps due to the fact that he lost both parents at a young age and his cousin-wife as well. Poe's focus on death and loss attracted me due to me own experiences, and attempting to define and express loss has become a main theme throughout my work. This story incorporates both real experiences and emotions as well as abstract images and information about Extra Sensory Perception and communication with the dead. Due to the fact that my mother died when I was 13, I never knew her as an adult. Most of the memories in the story have been passed down to me through family members and friends, which makes the task of drawing the line between fiction and non-fiction quite difficult. Most of what I know about my mother is through secondary sources, therefore I found it challenging and quite interesting to present her life in a creative non-fiction piece. This format enabled me to address the subject of loss in my own life head on, but it also enabled me to blur the lines between reality and creativity, making it easier in some ways to present the life of a woman I only know through stories.

I attempted to play with chronology and jump around in time in this piece, in order to represent the difficulty even I have with events that took place so long ago. My attempt to mix real events and information about ESP was fairly successful, but future drafts could be reworked to create more harmony between the two main ideas of the piece. This piece also includes a very distinct voice in the opening scene that does not necessarily match the rest of the piece, this too could be a focus for future revisions. Overall, this piece enabled me to get to the heart of my

struggle with loss and my mother's death, mainly because I was forced to realize that her history is not fully recorded. Therefore, any ability to understand myself in comparison to her was lost when she died, from this point, all I can do is assess myself in relation to her death and its affect on me. This piece also gave me the opportunity to explore my own family, as opposed to masking them behind fictional characters.

The stories *Blood Money* and *House of Walls* are next in the collection. *Blood Money* is another attempt at a slice of life story, which gives the reader only a glimpse into the main character's strange work environment. I remained true to my usual subject matter by creating John Benson as the head of a hazardous materials clean up crew. I attempted to incorporate as many sensory-based images and metaphors as possible into this short-short, in an effort to bombard the reader's senses for a short time in order to expose them to the horrors of cleaning murder scenes. While the story does incorporate many ideas and images of death, Benson makes a point to leave his work behind at the end of everyday, while admitting that if he were to let the violence and loss in, it could destroy him. *House of Walls* is similar in its sensory-based devices. Like others, *House of Walls* began as an attempt to tell a story about a daughter whose mother died while giving birth and whose father passed away when she became a young adult. While trying to explore parental loss, I decided to create a family home that would come to represent the main character, Venus', mind. Poe uses this device in *The Fall of the House of Usher* when the narrator describes the visual effect of the Usher estate as having, "bleak walls- upon the vacant eye-like windows, upon a few rank sedges- and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees- with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveler upon opium," (Poe 231). Poe uses the narrator to create a connection between the physicality of the estate and the emotional and mental stability of Usher

in a way that makes it hard to distinguish the two- Roderick Usher simply seems to fade into the home and it into him. The home in my story is built around a study, which lies in the center of the house. This study is where Venus' father dies and where all of her difficult memories remain. The rest of the rooms are arranged in a circular formation around the study, enabling one if they so chose, to circle the halls over and over again and never get anywhere, which is exactly how my grief-stricken main character feels.

While *House of Walls* includes a lot of imagery and symbolism, it does lack the back story necessary to connect the readers with the main character. This is one of the longest pieces I have attempted, and I believe where imagery and emotional insight are strong, back story lacks luster. I also attempted to create a painting in the story, which was painted by the main character. This painting represents her struggle and the division between she and her father, but the section that presents this image could be reworked in order to better create the visual for the reader.

Both *Blood Money* and *House of Walls* are good representations of a period of my writing when I attempted to hone my descriptive abilities. While I may have let other aspects of story writing go by the wayside, I believe these stories and others like them possess the general direction I'd like my work to go. Beyond telling a story, I want to be able to put visuals into a reader's mind through language.

While most of this collection includes stories that appeal to me for one or two specific reasons, the last three pieces are closer to the style I had been attempting to create in the previous pieces. The story *A Stiff Jester* was written both in an attempt to capture a whole family's reaction to death but also to show the lighter side of loss. While Poe is known best for his frightening tales of terror, he also includes quite a bit a dark humor in his pieces. In *The Cask of Amontillado*, the Montresor leads Fortunato away from a public gathering to his death. Fortunato

is dressed in a macabre jester's outfit with a three-pronged hat with bells at the end of each point. Due to his ridiculous attire and high level of intoxication, readers cannot help but chuckle at Fortunato's expense even though they are very well aware that the narrator plans to murder him. I am attracted to this form of dark humor and at the time I wrote the fictional version of *A Stiff Jester* I was very interested in attempting a dark-comedy piece.

The fictional version of *A Stiff Jester*, attempts to discover truths about death and family. Again, the setting involves a small-town family in the midst of dealing with a rather unusual funeral, in which the deceased has requested to be buried in a clown costume. It is a question of the main character, Sam's identity and how a brush with death helps shape his reality. This piece also attempts to balance the depressing subject matter with humor. The fact that Maury, the deceased, had enough humor in life to make this absurd request forces the other characters and the readers to accept death just as he has. This story attempts to capture the paradox of emotions one feels when a loved one passes away. Although we grieve, we do know that death is a guaranteed release from the troubles life offers. *A Stiff Jester* is simply a rejoicing at the passing of Maury's long, full life and Sam's discovery of a brand new one through that experience.

When traversing the world of unanswerable questions and challenging one's reality, humor seems to be the best way to create a buffer for the reader. Even dark humor that carries a hint of wicked nature can serve to lighten and improve difficult existential conundrums. Humor, too is full of paradox. I have an equation for how I attempt to portray humor in my work:

Step 1: Make the reader laugh

Step 2: Make the reader feel guilty about what they're laughing at, therefore they laugh even harder at the realization that they are enjoying something they shouldn't.

In a way, this is an extension of Poe's influence on my work because I use humor to point out the dark emotions and experiences that all people have. At times, I feel the need to push the moral envelope as far as I can, in order to prove to readers that their perceptions are fallible. A *Stiff Jester* is a good example of this tactic, specifically when Ed, who is suffering from Tourette's syndrome, has an outburst littered with offensive language and socially unacceptable observations during the funeral. The reader laughs, not only at Ed's nervous nature and uncontrollable outburst, but also at the fact that he is saying what everyone else is thinking. The fact that I can get my readers to laugh at a character that lives with a serious syndrome such as Tourette's completes my comic equation. The scenes are light hearted enough that the audience feels they have been given permission to laugh at something they normally shouldn't. A certain amount of shame and humiliation is required for this type of comedy.

David Sedaris is an influential writer for me, specifically for his ability to incorporate humor into controversial subject matter in order to make it more accessible to different types of readers. Sedaris' story *I Like Guys* manages to intertwine ideas about school integration in the 60's and blossoming into homosexuality as an adolescent. Sedaris uses language and humor to protect his point of view. He describes an experience at summer camp when he and another boy who seemed to also be gay, called each other faggots and played with the term, twisting it around and making it funny as opposed to offensive. In the story he makes a very strong correlation between the plights of African Americans and homosexuals, which in a serious forum could backfire tremendously. But, Sedaris is able to use his wit to connect with an audience who may not be homosexual. He ends the story with the line, "We are all brothers under the skin," (Sedaris 361). Sedaris manages to describe and attempts to make readers understand that homosexuality is

not a choice but nature; he uses comedy to create a universal language throughout his story. This technique enables him to connect with people he may have never been able to reach without it.

The humor in my work reflects my belief that all humans are sinister. One cannot find a man, woman or child who does not receive some kind of secret joy while watching a complete stranger slip and fall down, hurting only their pride. It is for this reason that readers enjoy the character of “Francie” in *A Stiff Jester*. While Francie is making a fool out of herself, getting drunk before the funeral, she says what everyone else is thinking. The audience can laugh at her lack of control as well as the truth that slips out between drunken outbursts.

This story, along with many others, was influenced by the fact that while I was a young girl, my father was a mortician. He never hesitated to explain the realities of death to me. In fact, at the very same time he owned a daycare facility and he decided that our family motto should be, “The Myers Family: We take ‘em from the cradle to the grave!” Clearly, I learned how to accept and even make fun of death at an early age. Sam’s job as a make-up artist for a funeral home is a direct reflection of my impressions of my father’s job. Painting and sculpting wax to create a better appearance seemed like art to me. Most people get one last look at their loved ones and it is the mortician who creates that for them, to the best of their ability. In the story, Sam gives Maury his final face while completing his own desire to express himself artistically.

I included two versions of *A Stiff Jester* in this collection; one is fiction and one is written as a play. The fictional story was written four years before the play. There were a number of reasons I chose to write the second version, the first of which is my love for drama. Both the reading and watching of plays feels like a fusion of literature and reality. Drama, if done correctly, enables the audience to come that much closer to experiencing the story and characters by imagining or watching real people onstage. The dramatic version of the story was a multiple-

draft effort to incorporate all that drama has to offer into the original story. The amount of characters was the initial issue. A large family scene is convenient enough in fiction, but when considering stage possibilities and restrictions, I realized just how large the cast was. Therefore, Sam's father, Howard, was cut from the story due to the fact that he simply provided comic relief and no real conflicts with other characters or himself. By rewriting Howard's death when Sam was young, I was able to add to the theme of ambiguity and identity presented through Sam's character. The fact that he did not have a father figure from a young age only magnifies his ambiguous nature and gives the audience a familial explanation for Sam's confusion. This change also allows Sam to consider both his father's death and Maury's death together due to the fact that Maury gave Sam guidance as a young man after his father passed. Sam's emotional drama is heightened, his personal issues are given new dimensions and the stage is less cluttered by removing Howard from the action and simply allowing his presence to float around in the audience's mind.

The character most affected by the rewrite is Maury. In the fictional version Maury never speaks. In the rewrite Sam was no longer the narrator but a guiding, interactive character and Maury was given the chance to come alive. Now, "alive" is a relative term. The play presents Maury in spirit form, appearing and speaking only to Sam. While Maury is given a voice, and his personality and background are further explored, the fact that only one character can hear or see him enables the audience to allow the absurdity of the walking dead. They can always assume that Sam is hallucinating, but hopefully by the end they will want to believe in Maury, dead or alive, due to his wit and jovial personality.

The fictional version of *A Stiff Jester* attempted to tie ideas about drama and the stage into Sam's background and experience. The rewrite allowed for Sam's narration to drop away

(becoming only a few monologues) and the drama to come alive. In the original Sam has to state, “Maury’s funeral was the only the only time in my life when the art and humor of theatre intertwined with the tragedy of death to create a scene I knew I’d never see on any stage.” The dramatic version allows Sam to interact with Maury to create the tension that was originally directed at the reader. The play has increased drama; therefore it does not have to spell out the message quite as clearly as the fictional version.

One of the most climactic scenes occurs when Maury and Sam have a discussion while Sam applies Maury’s clown make-up. The original fiction story describes this action, but the play enables Maury to be interactive during the application of his clown face. The audience gets to see Sam doing what he does best and Maury receiving his final fresh, shiny face. The point of this choice is to make Sam’s work and Maury’s face the most visible, vibrant image onstage and in the readers mind.

The ending also changed greatly, focusing in on many new and different ideas. Clearly, the play’s ending takes a much more religious tone than the story. Pastor Randolph reads a passage from the Bible that claims faith is not enough and that good deeds to prove you have faith are necessary. By adding this passage, I was able to include many more levels of consideration for the audience. Did Maury do what he did as a volunteer to help others or himself? Did he request to wear a clown suit at his own funeral to make his family and friends laugh or to entertain himself? Is Sam fully pursuing his abilities? Is Sam completely honest about who he is with his family? What is faith in a world where the dead walk, talk and juggle?

The ending also allows Sam to speak with the audience and focus in on the fact that Grandma Cici has a moment of joy during the funeral, which enables Sam to reflect on his own issues with death. The paradox of grief and joy is most complex when dealing with the passing

of a loved one. It is one of the few times in life when people experience two extreme emotions simultaneously. Ultimately, this story tries to capture the moment when someone is buried in grief, just beginning to understand the death, and they remember a personality trait or funny story about their loved one. To reflect on someone's full life is difficult without a certain amount of joy for their accomplishments and originality and the simple fact that you were blessed enough to know them. These moments are gifts which enable us to experience our lives from outside the usual boundaries of "normal" perception. While these moments are extreme and hardly comparable to everyday life, somehow you feel more real and alive during those experiences than you ever did sitting behind your desk or driving to the supermarket.

This collection is purely a representation of the progression of my writing. These pieces encompass the ideas about life and loss that I hope to express more fully in later work. The beginning of this collection contains quite a few stories that helped me learn to hone specific fictional devices through simply writing the story and seeing where it lacked and where it became captivating. It is not until the later pieces that I truly believe a reader can begin to see what will ultimately be my unique style as a writer. I feel as if I had to conquer the mundane, the cliché and the foundational aspects of writing before I could find my own voice. But, the final pieces feel closer to what I have always strived for than any previous writing.

Clearly, I offer no real answers to life's big questions in my work, but I do attempt to capture the journey to and struggle with those answers. While ambiguity and paradox pervade my life and work, I simply attempt to understand it the best I can. By exploring these issues I hope to broaden my own perspective, share my experience with others in a universal way and possibly open readers up to the awful beauty that life has to offer.

Dark, gothic literature was my first love and largest influence due to the fact that I could most easily identify with its themes and subject matter. But, as I am an ambiguous writer, I soon found that my work did not seem complete until I learned to use humor and wit to my advantage. The paradox of dark and light subjects and themes enables me to more fully express my experience, but never completely. Just when I think I've got it all figured out my perception of the world and my own identity falls apart all over again. Learning to recognize these moments and traverse through them is central to my fictional efforts. My work will continue to question the ideas of truth and memory, death and fantasy; but I am afraid and intrigued by the fact that they may all be parts of the same force. All of these questions possess the same dark ambiguity and paradoxical relationships to each other. Because the answer to it all seems so close and nearly attainable it is a journey I will continue to make. I must remember though, that it is not the destination but the journey there that has the most to offer.

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PART II
SHORT STORIES

Lifelines

Welcome, and thank you for choosing Lifelines. Lifelines is committed to transporting you to your intended destination in an efficient and comfortable manner. My name is Padme, and I will be your guide to your next life. I will now cover some safety precautions and regulations concerning your journey.

Once Lifelines has reached your intended destination and you begin your new life, note that you will be in a holding unit for approximately nine months. Depending on your life's circumstances, that time may vary.

Emergency exits are located in your life, but are strongly discouraged. If you choose to end your life before the natural death you have been assigned, please be aware that Lifelines may not be available to transport you to your next destination. If this should occur, you will need to wait in Limbo Waiting Area 7 until we can arrange to pick you up.

Should an emergency occur during your lifetime, there are numerous procedures you can perform to ensure your safety, but Lifelines does suggest to calmly breathe the air around you in and continue to live.

Lifelines takes pride in the transportation of souls and, here's an interesting tidbit, has transported some of the most recognizable souls throughout time. Some of our better known passengers include: Cleopatra, Michelangelo, and yes, even Shakespeare- and let me tell you, he certainly enjoyed our selection of mixed nuts.

Again, thank you for choosing Lifelines. We know you could have chosen any one of our competitors and we appreciate your business. Sit back, relax and enjoy the in-flight movie. Today's showing of *Oh, God!*, starring George Burns was sponsored by Starbucks.

Lifelines cannot be held responsible for any discomfort, pain, anxiety, sickness or loss that you may experience once you are conceived. Concurrently, Lifelines does not guarantee any quality or duration of your life. If you are not satisfied with your life, please do not try to contact Lifelines, as we do not have a complaint department.

The seatbelt sign has now been turned off and you are free to roam about the cabin.

The Genealogy of Rust

Michael Sanchez was raised, if you want to call it that, by his mother, Sylvia. Sylvia was a boisterous woman in her own right, but behind all the smiles lay something far darker. The only other woman that Michael had ever known to have the same gloomy depths as his mother was her sister, Rosa. His Aunt Rosa still lived in Mexico in a little village called Huetamo, which was about two hundred miles southwest of Mexico City. Rosa had been disowned by her two brothers after their parents died; Sylvia was the only sibling to ever maintain contact. Sylvia visited Rosa religiously. Every August, Sylvia would disappear, never on the same day. She was secretive about their meetings, and only allowed Michael to accompany her once when he was twelve years old. On the way to the airport Michael looked into his mother's weary eyes and asked, "How come nobody else wants to see Aunt Rosa? Uncle Silver gave me a cross to take with me. He said, 'God will keep me safe.'"

Sylvia's face twisted harshly at the knowledge of her brother's intrusion. Before answering, Sylvia held her hand out to Michael until he retrieved the crucifix from his small, corduroy pocket and placed it in her palm. Sylvia considered each word carefully as she explained, "Aunt Rosa believes in things that Uncle Silver and the rest of the family don't understand. That's why I am taking you to see for yourself that it is all real. I know you will believe like I do."

Michael wasn't sure what his mother meant. He wondered if she was talking about things like Santa Clause. Michael started out onto the runway as he thought, "I hope Aunt Rosa doesn't still believe in Santa, everybody knows that's a lie."

* * *

After they arrived in Mexico City and rented a car, Sylvia and Michael drove the long stretch of lonely road that led to Huetamo. Once in the small village, they turned off the main road and bounced down a gravel path until they finally saw a house. Aunt Rosa's dwelling was a shack of a home, painted a dismal brown and surrounded by a repetitive brown fence. As the two travelers walked up to the gate they saw a yard full of chickens. Hens and roosters hurriedly darted to and fro and there were so many you couldn't begin to count them. This poultry jubilee masked the ominous feel of the house itself. As Sylvia and Michael made their way through the sea of feathers, Michael saw something stirring through the front window. As the front door opened, it gave way to a small-framed woman in her early fifties. Nothing on her cinnamon hued face gave away her age, nothing except for her eyes. There seemed to be something much older behind her large, black pupils. Sylvia held Rosa in a long embrace and then introduced her to Michael.

"I saw you when you were just a baby, mijo. I'm sure you don't remember."

"I don't," Michael said unsure of the situation while he clung to his mother's side.

Rosa smiled and invited them in. The main room of the house had a fireplace and a table. There was a small kitchen in one corner and a bed in the other. The only vibrant objects in the room were four massive drums beside the hearthstone and a grand, red rug in the middle of the floor. Although the kitchen area was small, every counter top was filled with food. Michael eyed bowls and platters full of rice, vegetables, and an assortment of other dishes that he was unfamiliar with.

"There is going to be a celebration. Aunt Rosa is going to help me tonight," Sylvia said when she saw Michael inspecting the food.

"Help you with what, Mom?"

"She's going to pray for us, pray that you and I will be healthy and happy and safe from anyone who might try to hurt us."

Michael looked uncertain.

"Then we'll have a party and eat all of this wonderful food," said Sylvia trying to make Michael feel like it was going to be fun.

As the day progressed people began to arrive. In total, four men and two women. The adults sat and talked until the sun began to set, then everyone began to stir about. The men sat in chairs at each of the four corners of the crimson rug. Michael, Sylvia, and the two strange women sat along the back wall of the room. Aunt Rosa sat in the middle of the rug. The men picked up the drums and began to beat out primitive rhythms. The women, including Sylvia clapped along as Michael watched curiously.

Aunt Rosa stood up and began to dance. She threw her arms out and flailed her body around like she was trying to jump right out of her skin. While she danced, Aunt Rosa prayed for good luck and forgiveness of sins. This ritual continued until Aunt Rosa stopped abruptly with her head down. Everyone else quickly became as still as she was. As she raised her eyes, Michael discovered that her face looked different. Her expression was warped and now resembled what Michael had sensed behind her eyes before.

Aunt Rosa began to speak in a loud, bellowing voice. Michael couldn't understand what she was saying but he knew she was nothing but serious. As Sylvia began to cry, Michael was scared and awestruck at the same time. As Aunt Rosa arrived at the end of her utterances, one of the women by Sylvia placed a wooden box in front of Aunt Rosa. As she slid the lid open Michael spied one of the deranged chickens he had seen in the yard of the home. The hen

clucked fervently as Aunt Rosa grabbed it and replaced the lid. She placed the chicken on its side on top of the box and held it down forcefully. One of the men stood up and walked over to the box. As he leaned down, Michael realized the man had a large blade in his hand. Without warning, the man chopped off the chicken's head and sliced its belly open. One of the women carried a wooden bowl to Aunt Rosa and she hung the bird upside down, letting the blood flow down and collect in the basin.

At the sight of this bloodshed, Michael passed out. By the time he came to, the chicken had been cooked and the feast had begun. Once he saw the prepared bird on the table, Michael questioned what he'd seen.

"Is that the chicken I saw earlier?"

"Yes, honey, Aunt Rosa always eats the animals she sacrifices," explained

"Sacrifices?"

"It's kind of like saying thank you to God for everything we have."

"I don't want to eat it," said Michael as he squeamishly eyed the table.

Sylvia assured Michael that he wouldn't have to eat anything he didn't want to as they approached the table. The rest of the evening was full of eating and discussion. Michael tired quickly due to his eventful day and fell into a troublesome sleep. Disturbing visions floated around in his little mind as he tossed and turned.

* * *

The next morning Michael awoke to the roosters crowing. As he wiped the sleep from his eyes he began to realize that the crows of these birds sounded different than he was used to.

He opened the window beside the bed and realized that the cocks were crowing a word.

Michael's jaw dropped once he discovered what they were calling up to the rising sun.

"Rosa! Rooooooosaaa!" drifted through the wind into Michael's ears.

Michael's eyes widened as he jumped from the bed and ran out the door in search of his mother. Sylvia was in the yard with Rosa. Both women were seated in chairs pulled from the house facing eastward to observe the sun peaking up over the horizon. Michael jumped into his mother's arms as he whispered, "Do you hear the roosters crowing? They know Aunt Rosa's name!"

Sylvia just looked at Michael approvingly as she pulled him close to her. While the warm embrace quieted his questions, Michael's mind was still racing. After a while, the trio headed inside to eat breakfast.

"I hope you weren't too scared last night, I really do love you Michael. You are my blood, you're family and you should never fear your own blood," Rosa said calmly as she filled Michael's plate with potatoes.

"I wasn't scared," Michael retorted defensively. "I just don't like seeing blood, that's all."

"Blood is what binds us together and keeps us alive," Aunt Rosa whispered.

Michael stared into the woman's face trying to understand. Just then Sylvia changed the subject and informed Michael that they would be returning to the airport that day due to something that had come up at home. Michael was neither glad to leave nor sad. The entire experience had left him in a state of shock.

* * *

Fifteen years had passed since Michael witnessed his Aunt Rosa's unsettling rituals. Michael now lived far from Sylvia; in fact he hadn't spoken to his mother in five years. Just as his family had chosen to separate themselves from Aunt Rosa, Michael had severed his relationship with his mother. He moved and gave her no forwarding address when she admitted herself into rehab for the third time. Michael was tired of his mother's lack of control and felt he had no other option.

As Michael flew into Mexico City on a business trip his memory was flooded with the events that had occurred over a decade before. He emerged himself in his work for four of the five days he was there. On the last day, Michael decided to drive by Aunt Rosa's house and see if she was still around.

"She's just as much of a family outcast as I have become, we've got that in common," Michael thought while trying to convince himself to push on toward Huetamo. As Michael spied the house it seemed even smaller than it did the first time he'd seen it. Chickens no longer littered the yard and everything seemed still. Michael walked around the house, peering into the windows. He knew no one lived there anymore when he saw the empty room and its bare walls.

Michael slouched back to his car feeling disappointed at his discovery. Once back onto the main road of Huetamo, he stopped at a home near the corner. He asked the woman who answered if she knew what had happened to his Aunt Rosa. The woman explained to him in broken English, "She gone, dead. I got it for you."

Michael didn't have time to ask what she had before the little woman spun around and came back to the door with a wooden box. Michael stared at the hollowed out cube as he realized it was the same box his Aunt Rosa had pulled the chicken out of. The woman thrust the box toward Michael and closed the door once it was in his hands. He didn't open the box until he

got back to the states. Once in the comfort of his own home, Michael settled himself on the couch and peered at the old wooden piece. As he slid the lid over he saw three envelopes. He reached in and took them out of the box.

As Michael opened the first envelope he discovered a picture of his eighth birthday party. Sylvia must have given the photo to his Aunt Rosa. In the picture, Michael was seated at a table with his classmates and friends. A birthday cake was sitting in front of him. Sylvia was in the picture, too. She had a beautiful dress on and was standing behind Michael with a huge smile on her face. Michael noted how happy she appeared. He thought back to that day and remembered how just after this picture was taken and the candles were blown out, his mother began to drink. The drinking wasn't a problem, but the fact that she had filled herself with pills that morning turned the occasion into an incident. Michael had tried to forget the show his mother had put on. He had been overwhelmed with embarrassment as Sylvia danced and sang and then turned fierce and cursed his friends' mothers just before passing out completely.

"At least, I haven't had to deal with her shit since I moved," thought Michael as he placed the picture back in the envelope.

He reached for the second envelope, opened it, and pulled out a newspaper clipping. He read the piece through with growing interest. The story covered a runaway case of two young sisters. They had disappeared and weren't found for ten days. When they were recovered, the younger of the two was found in a bar in the next town over, three sheets to the wind. Meanwhile, the older sister was found in the same town in the company of a well-known follower of Macumba or "the dark craft." The girls' father was quoted as saying, "I cannot be angry at their sinful acts. These girls are my blood; I am overjoyed to have them in my arms again."

As he read to the end of the quote, Michael read the name of the man and realized it was his grandfather, Michael Sanchez. He had never known his grandfather or that he was named after him. After reading the story a second time, he concluded that the sisters had to have been his mother and Aunt Rosa.

"How could he put up with their craziness, especially when it started so young," thought Michael as he re-read his grandfather's quote.

"These girls are my blood."

Michael contemplated what that meant. Then, he tore himself away from the newspaper clipping and his thoughts as he reached for the final envelope. As he peered into the opened pouch he saw a single piece of paper. Michael pulled the small square out and turned it over. Along the top of the paper someone had written his mother's name. Below her name was a telephone number that he didn't recognize. The last bit of writing was at the bottom of the paper. Michael looked at this line intently trying to comprehend it. The final line was nothing more than a date--that day's date. Michael gazed at the numbers, 8-10-99 in disbelief. He couldn't understand how this could be. Michael sat back in his chair and observed all of his findings. Thoughts of his mother's addictions and lack of control along with reflections on his Grandfather's ample forgiveness pushed each other around in his mind. Michael looked at the veins in his arm and thought, "This blood is not my own. I have Grandpa Sanchez in me and he was a good man."

Michael picked up the picture of his birthday party and wondered how many traits his mother had passed to him from her womb. He knew he had her eyes, although his weren't always drenched in tears of anguish like his mother's. Michael tried to deny the fact that he was

one-half of his mother. Then, as if she were standing directly over him, Michael heard the words of his Aunt Rosa ring clearly through the air, "Blood is what binds us and keeps us alive."

Michael finally admitted to himself that his mother had done all that she could and that she truly loved him.

"She just didn't love herself enough to hold it all together," thought Michael.

As his heart raced and his heartbeat pounded in his brain, Michael picked up the paper with the phone number on it. He then rose slowly and walked toward his telephone.

Mad Mary Sane

I had known Mary for a very long time. We grew up together, childhood playmates you could say. Mary was a calm spirited person, yes meek and mild was Mary Sane. James Sane, her husband, was quite the opposite. He was always loud and never knew when enough was enough. James was a business man and did quite well for himself. James always left the house early and came home late, but as he explained to poor old Mary, “That’s just the price you pay to have everything you want. I may not always be here for you, but you’ve got plenty to keep you busy.”

Although James’ main goal in life was to acquire wealth he would still bring Mary flowers on anniversaries and always remembered holidays. I always told her that this was his way of compensating for never being there. Personally, I really think he cheated on her and felt guilty so he’d commit random acts of romanticism so that she wouldn’t suspect anything.

Mary and James had been married for eleven years. They had no children due to James’ belief that they were backbreakers rather than blessings. Mary liked children just fine, and at one time wanted one of her own; but after a few years, she had decided to keep her opinion to herself. She was like that, always giving in to him.

I’ll tell you one thing; I’d rather be alone than have every decision made for me. Frankly, I got so tired of Mary just accepting the way James treated her that I began to tell her that it was right, that she was the kind of woman who needed this structure. She needed to be harnessed by the burden of love. I know deep down that she didn’t deserve any of it, but for some reason I condemned her for her weakness.

One evening as Mary sat at home waiting for James to return from work she began to get dizzy. She raced to the bathroom and vomited. When I spoke with the next day, I suggested that she consider taking a pregnancy test.

“I don’t need at test, I always use my diaphragm,” she retorted in a slow, bored tone.

“Birth control isn’t always one hundred percent effective, you should just check it out,” I said.

So Mary Sane bought a test and as she awaited the results she wondered what she would do if she were pregnant. She knew James would not be happy, to say the least.

Five minutes later Mary peeked into the bathroom and gasped when she saw the indicator displaying a positive sign.

Mary stayed awake most of the night trying to figure out what she should do. I told her that there was no reason to get rid of the baby, if anything James should go. She was approaching forty and knew this would be one of her last chances to have a healthy pregnancy. Poor Mary Sane, a baby in her belly and troubles on her mind.

The next morning at the breakfast table, Mary was as bright as ever. Making sure that James had his toast and coffee and anything else he requested in a prompt manner. As he finished his meal, Mary posed an odd question.

“Do you still love me James?”

James was a bit taken by this inquiry, but he managed to answer with what he assumed was a desirable sentiment.

“Why yes, dear, I love you as much now as I did the day we were married. That will never change.”

Mary knew that even though he was telling her what he thought she wanted to hear, he was right. He had always possessed the same luke-warm feelings for her. She was something to fill up space in his life, no different than a rubber tree in the corner or his mechanical tie rack in the closet. A smile broadened across her dainty lips as she watched James finish his second cup

of coffee. Mary wondered how long it would take the strychnine she had put in his coffee to take a hold of him. She wondered what it was going to be like without him. She wondered what it was going to be like to not be Sane anymore, no longer Mary Sane.

I was overjoyed. I felt like she had finally heard my voice and was picking herself up from the miserable life she had made for herself. I never did like that James, and now it was just Mary and I and the baby, together, forever. Mary walked out into the garden and sat among the flowers she had grown. From afar, she simply looked as though she were admiring her green thumb and enjoying the morning sun. But, as James stumbled out of the kitchen door and across the lawn toward Mary, he could hear a low, quiet mumbling. Mary rocked on her legs, murmuring to herself, “Mad Mary Sane, she’s in my brain.”

James collapsed behind her and flailed about as white foam frothed from his mouth. This struggle was short lived. I knew Mary was going to be alright, I had finally gotten through to her. At last, she had done what I had been asking her to do for so many years. Mad Mary Sane, I’m in her brain.

Ghosts in the Family Tree

My home is my castle. Once I get inside and lock the door I feel secure, safe from burglars, attackers and even salesman. Due to the thick curtains over the window next to the front door and the peephole, I have been saved from numerous encounters with people selling everything from vacuums to siding to eternal salvation. I live alone and prefer to keep out the crazies.

One evening, after a particularly long night class on campus, I couldn't wait to get home and unwind. I shuffled around my odd box of a house; the rooms were configured into a perfect square and my ceilings were extremely low and bowed down under the weight of cheap construction, creating a cave-like atmosphere—which I preferred. It felt small and safe, like an underground borough. After changing into my pajamas, I picked up a book from my nightstand and walked into the living room. There was quiet all around; I had not yet cranked up my stereo to listen to some old, cheesy band that I was ashamed to play around my friends. Nor had I turned on the television to watch a show that contained cheap drama and inevitably ended in someone crying as well as the loss of a few of my brain cells. I was simply enjoying the silence. As I walked toward my old, comfortable couch, I froze mid-stride. My head felt hot and I had a strange sensation that something was wrong. Just as I put my hand to my head, I heard something. I heard a voice—not far away or from outside, but from inside the house. It did not originate from the bedroom or kitchen, but sounded as if someone was speaking directly into my ear. It was not loud, but a loud whisper—like an old woman who is losing her hearing, whispering loudly about “Francie Cartwright’s new bastard grandchild,” into her equally deaf friend’s ear; loud enough for the whole Bunko club to catch if only they had remembered to wear their hearing aides. The voice sounded urgent, almost angry, but constrained to a deafening

whisper that boomed in my ears and mind. It said only one word, my name, Amanda. I spun around, dropping my book, expecting to have to defend myself against someone that had broken into my home—but I was alone. The voice reeled in my mind; I could still feel the intruder's lips against my ear as I raced through every room checking behind the doors and in the closets. I found nothing but my own fear. Was I going to become an old, crazy woman who talks to invisible friends? Was this the beginning of the end of my sanity, a warning sign for what was to come? Or had I actually heard someone? Once I regained a bit of composure I thought about all of the other times I'd felt the way I did just before the voice spoke. Frozen, uncomfortable, expecting. In the end, I slept with the light on and chalked it up to either a minor glitch in my poor brain's system or some kind of brief communication with someone that was not there. Someone in another place. Perhaps I opted for the paranormal explanation because the question of my own sanity was too great, or because I couldn't deny the fact that I had felt someone there, sensed their presence.

* * *

My great grandfather, Raymond Patrick Sullivan, was an Irishman who lived well beyond his means. He wore wing-tipped shoes and silk suits in small, dusty towns around New Mexico. He was of great stature, towering over most, which called even more attention to his flashy wardrobe. Raymond had been quite handsome in his youth and with age, grew into a stately man with bright eyes and skin darkened by the desert sun. He always leaned toward the extravagant side of life. He made great efforts to look debonair, despite the fact that he could barely support his growing family. He would disappear for long periods of time, claiming the need for adventure in far off places. No one ever knew where he went on these vacations from reality, but

he always came back refreshed. Raymond lived a different life than most and claimed to possess the ability to foresee events and communicate with the dead. He spent the greater part of his life living according to his visions, disregarding all logic or advice that anyone had to offer. While this may seem far-fetched, his beliefs were supported scientifically.

In 1927, Dr. J. B. Rhine started a parapsychology laboratory at Duke University. Dr. Rhine is credited in the Oxford English Dictionary for coining the term “extrasensory perception”. He was the first to study the phenomenon of ESP in a laboratory. After moving to North Carolina, Raymond joined the study and was a subject of Rhine’s research for almost five years.

The research often involved the use of Zener cards. The participants were dealt five cards at a time out of a twenty-five card deck. Each card displayed one of five symbols: a circle, square, plus sign, triangle or three. The subjects were asked to predict what symbol was on each card in the deck. Free response methods were also used at the Rhine laboratory during this time. This study involved two subjects, each in a soundproof booth in separate rooms. One subject would be asked to telepathically communicate a predetermined image to the other. I imagine Raymond, sitting on a booth, smoothing out his suit pants, concentrating on conveying a bright yellow banana to his test partner. He took the research very seriously and I’m sure this exercise required intense focus and probably made the lines above his eyes more prevalent with each meditation and furrow. Raymond believed in his paranormal abilities and wanted to prove they existed in the laboratory as well as at home.

“I knew what my father could do, what he saw,” my grandmother, Lorraine, said. “I was frightened of it as a child. When I was young, I too could see those who weren’t there, hear the

voices of the dead. But, that just wasn't for me; I eventually learned to block out the perception I had."

"Do you believe it now, Grandma? Or was it your imagination?" I asked.

"Oh, I believe it; I couldn't have been that frightened of my own imagination. People are always around."

I have no doubt that Raymond was disappointed in his daughter's decision to neglect her gift. He believed it was passed on through the generations and that at least one of his children would possess the ability. Once he accepted the Lorraine did not want his gift, he waited. He waited until she grew up and had children of her own.

"Where are we going, Grandpa?" my mother asked.

"We're going to see a lady that will be able to tell what kind of person you are. She's going to ask you some questions- she's very nice," Raymond said.

My mother, Reenie, had just turned ten years old when Raymond decided it was time for her to go to a seer. He believed she too had the gift and wanted confirmation. I picture my mother sitting in the passenger seat of Raymond's truck, wearing a small homemade dress, wondering what kind of adventure she was in for. Perhaps the seer was a woman with long, dark hair and elaborate jewelry who smiled as she held my mother's small hand and traced the lines on her palm. Mama never revealed what happened in the meeting, only the fact that the seer agreed that she possessed extra perceptions.

My mother grew into a voluptuous, vivacious woman who commanded attention through her mischievously dark eye and boisterous sense of humor. She was much more willing to explore the possibility of ESP and communication with the dead than her mother, Lorraine had been. To a skeptic, mama just had an uncanny ability to read others. But there was more to it

than that. She knew simple things: who was on the line before she picked up the phone or who was going to drop by unexpectedly. She also had visions. Early in life, Reenie had a premonition that she would die when she was eighty one. She had seen her own gravestone and the only thing it said was “81”. She believed this to be true until she had her own children.

Once my older sister, Candice, turned sixteen Mama started giving her extra gifts at Christmas.

“What’s this, Mom? More presents? Candice asked hopefully.

“Yes. But they’re not for you. They are for the boys you are going to have when you get older. I want you to keep these wrapped and give them to your baby boys for me.”

Mama never explained her actions, claiming only that she wanted to get a head start. But, somehow, she knew. She knew Candice was going to have sons and she knew she would not be there to meet them.

* * *

Now, I can’t really claim that the Sullivan family gift is real or false, but I do know that peculiar things happen when you are open to them. Long before I was told of our strange history, I experienced my own kind of ESP. There is no other way to describe it than a vision. It may have started as a dream, but it stayed in my mind clearly. When I was fourteen—my first year of high school—I met a girl named Lauren. We conversed regularly in gym class, but that was the extent of our friendship. After a few months, whenever I saw her or thought of her I could see a picture of her in my mind. People do this often; they have a set visual of specific people. But, something was different about this. Whenever I pictured Lauren I saw her wearing overalls, leaning over a table. When I scanned down her body, I realized that she was at least eight months pregnant. I felt guilty for picturing her this way. I assumed it was some

unconscious reaction to the fact that she had moved to my uptight, suburban town from the wrong side of the tracks. Don't all those girls get pregnant eventually? It was strange at first, but I could not shake it. After that year passed I never saw her much, until a lunch period during my sophomore year. I was looking down at my food and was overcome with déjà vu. Everywhere I looked seemed to be something I'd already seen. My ears clogged and every sound was muffled, colors and faces became surreal. I looked up from my table and across the lunchroom to see a girl standing with her back to me. It was Lauren; she was wearing the same faded, blue overalls that I had seen over and over again in my mind. She slowly turned toward the table she was standing at, leaned over to reach for a French fry on her friend's plate. I looked down at her stomach and saw that she had lost her pubescent figure and had grown a big, round belly that looked that looked like it was about to pop. My déjà vu experience came to some kind of head: my ears popped and I could hear the lunchroom chatter clearly again. I was stunned; I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I spoke to Lauren briefly before she left school to have the baby and she told me how she had gotten pregnant by her boyfriend toward the end of the class we had together.

“Can you believe it? I was playing dodge ball in gym class with you and I was pregnant and didn't even know it!”

I know it. I had known before it ever happened. I felt guilty for a long time after that, believing that I had somehow caused it.

* * *

Ten years after my mother started giving my sister gifts for her future sons, Mama was diagnosed with lung cancer—she was forty-two. While Mama had once claimed she'd live to be eighty-one, she realized that was not going to happen. She prepared herself for the end and wrote long letters to her children, friends and family. She told me in her letter that although she wouldn't be around to see me grow, she knew I'd be a successful woman some day. She also claimed that she would, if she could, be my guardian and watch over me always. Although she died at age forty-three, it was exactly eighty-one days from the day they diagnosed her cancer to the day she passed away. Perhaps she misunderstood her visions. Eighty-one years is a long healthy life, but eighty-one days is not a long time to wrap up your life. Maybe it was a warning. For a long time I believed her death had something to do with me because I was born on January 8, 1981: 1-8-81.

But a person can force themselves to believe anything in the throws of grief. Sadly, Mama passed away one month before my sister's wedding. They had arranged to have a small ceremony in her hospital room so that she could see them get married. However, the morning the ceremony was to take place, Mama died quietly before the family arrived. Within five years of Mama's death, Candice had three bouncing boys, all of which will have presents from their grandmother every Christmas.

* * *

I didn't learn about my family's history of paranormal belief until after Mama died. My sister called me up one day and started telling me about our great grandfather Raymond and the random events that led to his belief, as well as Mama's experiences. I took it all in, not knowing

how to react. The line grew quiet for a minute until my sister asked, “Well, I guess what I’m getting at it is...Mama always believed that one of us would have it too. She believed it passes on to the next generation and, well, I don’t have it...”

I was stunned for a moment, visions of Lauren’s pregnancy filled my mind and I was scared. I told my sister what I had foreseen.

“Oh, well, I always thought it might be you. Is it scary?” She seemed relieved and jealous at the same time.

“Yes, I mean who knows if it’s real anyway,” I said, trying to downplay what had happened.

“It’s real Manda. I saw what Mama could do—what she knew. Do you think she knew you have it?”

This question took me by surprise. I was intrigued by the idea that I might be able to communicate with Mama, but frightened at the thought of opening my mind to death itself. This is a peculiar position for a young girl to be in, contemplating whether or not I can predict future events, make contact with the dead, carry on the dubious legacy of my dead mother—which could possibly be the greatest connection we’ll ever have. I wanted it to be real, for the simple fact that I was clutching to anything that might bring me closer to the woman who gave me life. I wanted it to be a mistake, just a series of coincidences because I was scared—scared of what I might see and who I might encounter.

There have been many small occurrences that challenge my skepticism. One particular event frightened me to the point of panic. It was just before mama died and I had ridden the bus home to my father’s house. I was waiting for him to get home from work because I had a school function to attend that evening. The Texas heat had filled the house during the day, and the air

conditioner wasn't cooling the rooms as quickly as I had hoped. I lay down in my bedroom floor with my head and shoulders out in the hallway on the cool, tile floor for relief from the heat. I heard the door that leads from the garage into the house open and close. I heard my father's footsteps in the kitchen.

“Dad, we gotta go soon. I have to run by the store and pick up something before we go up to school. Why were you late? You always get home by six o'clock?”

No answer.

“Dad?” I said, confused as to why he wouldn't answer me.

But there was no reply, only the sound of footsteps leaving the kitchen and coming down the hallway toward my room. They grew louder and louder on the tile and I sat up, expecting my father to come around the corner. But no one did. The footsteps stopped just around the other side of the wall, and then there was silence. I jumped up and ran around the corner, thinking my father was playing a trick on me. I found no one. I ran out to the garage and found no car. I couldn't make any sense of it, but I knew someone else was in the house. I went outside and sat on my trampoline for a good half hour until my dad came rolling down the driveway. He searched the house, but found nothing.

Perhaps the last bit of my childhood imagination was the one playing tricks on me—there was no real explanation. I knew what I'd heard and make-believe games never felt that real.

There is evidence and belief in ESP, telepathy, and communication with the dead; but there are no hard facts. Dr. Rhine's studies at Duke University are widely acclaimed for their originality, but are also discredited for their lack of stable conditions and results. Some tried to discredit his Zener cards by showing how a subject could learn to memorize small marks or creases on the cards to determine the hidden symbols. Dr. Rhine is constantly questioned for

trying to document that which is unexplained, while at the same time given great respect for his efforts and determination. People still flock to the new Rhine Research Center that Dr. Rhine's daughter now runs, attempting to tell their stories and find explanations for their strange experiences.

Some families carry hereditary traits for specific diseases, my family tree has spirits and visions drifting through its veins, dripping from its limbs. Sometimes I wonder if it's not unlike high blood-pressure or diabetes, a predisposed ability to sense certain things. But this affliction cannot be cured or controlled. Unlike diseases people do not feel sympathy for the sufferer, but instead, wonder, speculation and even fear. Of course I want to be able to predict when and if I'll make my first meaningful contribution to the world, know whether or not I will marry, and communicate with someone I've lost. But I do not wish to see my own death, or see death standing in front of me in the form of someone I once knew, now rotten with dirt and decay. This perception is not as easily harnessed as all of the television psychics and roadside palm readers claim it to be. But the heart of my struggle lies in the fact that I will never know whether it's real or if I've warped my own mind into believing it. Sometimes, when you want something bad enough, you get it. I don't want to wake up one morning later in life and realize that instead of falling into a long line of clairvoyants, I am simply another edition to my family's bowl of nuts.

The only truth I have ever seen in all of this mumbo jumbo came about a few years after Mama died. I had become quite disheartened by the fact that I could no longer recall my mother's vibrant, distinct voice in my mind. Without the recollection of her voice, she seemed to fade from my memory. I was convinced I would lose all recollection of her mannerisms and

idiosyncrasies. One night, I had a dream that I was in the house she lived in last. We were seated at the kitchen table.

“Hey Manda. How are you? Mama asked.

“I’m good, Mama. I miss you. You’ve been gone for so long.”

We both acknowledged that she had already passed and continued the conversation quickly—as if we both knew the window of communication was going to close soon.

“You know I love you more than anything, Manda. I wish I could be there for you. But I’m here, and I will always watch out for you from this place. Please know that I’m with you always.”

“I know, Mama.”

She smiled her boisterous grin at me and the dream ended. I woke up immediately; it must have been the middle of the night because my room was pitch black. I felt hot tears running down my cheeks as my mother’s voice rang clear in my mind and ears; the room seemed to vibrate with her sweet Southern drawl. Somehow, for a brief moment, we connected. It was fiercely intense to wake with her all around me—I was flooded with emotion and memories I hadn’t been able to recapture for years.

Since then, I have again forgotten her playful tones and charismatic speech. There are no home movies or audio tapes of her voice, of her—all I have are silent pictures. I question my abilities, their frequency and how long I will experience these gifts if that’s what they truly are, but I also wait. I patiently wait for Mama to return to me and tell me that she’s there, that just because my memory fades doesn’t mean she no longer exists. I hang on my great grandfather’s spirit limb, in the hope of hearing voices in the night.

Blood Money

John Benson never went a working day without seeing blood and tears. Johnny had started a biological clean-up business just two years before and never seemed to run out of customers. Today he was taking his crew to a house on 37th and Vine in a low income neighborhood. He didn't expect much, but as they pulled into the driveway Johnny discovered a very quaint house with bright, white siding and full flower boxes hanging from every window. Compared to its neighbors, this home was a breath of lavender in a grimy gas station bathroom ten miles off of the highway. As the victim's daughter opened the door, Johnny inhaled a gust of moldy air that bellowed through his nostrils in a thick haze. Ms. Johnson showed Johnny to the upstairs bedroom where her mother had been murdered.

As he walked into the bedroom, the splatters and slashes of blood on all four walls and the ceiling screamed an experience of such gore that Johnny had to divert his eyes back to the hallway just to get the violent visual reverbs to stop pounding on his brain. Turning back, he focused in on the wallpaper under the blood. The tattered paper looked like it had been boiled with brown beans and minced meat, and had Johnny cut a slice from the spongy wall he knew it would have tasted like Sundays at his Grandmother's house. He would often focus on the untouched aspects of the homes, such as knickknacks and family photos, rather than let the horror and grief he was surrounded by envelop him. After inspecting the room, he came to the conclusion that Mrs. Johnson was a collector of sorts; on every table top and shelf there were statuettes of nude women. There were two bookshelves on either side of the room that were cluttered with buxom blondes, bulbous brunettes and fiery red heads, all baring themselves for anyone to admire. One of the larger pieces was a young woman reaching high above her head,

perhaps originally taking in the sunlight in a meadow; now she was covered with blood, a maiden bathing in rains of red. To Johnny, her blood-smearred breasts were two ripe fruits waiting to be plucked from a human vine. His mouth watered as he unloaded all of his chemicals and began to soak up the placid, crimson lake that had settled in the middle of the floor. As his powder began to capture the blood, it turned to an oatmeal consistency and started to sizzle and crack in protest of being awakened from its still slumber.

For the rest of the afternoon, Johnny and his crew chased blood trails up and down walls and under furniture; they were all astonished at its abundance. By five o'clock the house was clean, the equipment was loaded and Johnny had already obtained the check for payment from Ms. Johnson. Johnny never liked staying late at the sites; in fact, he made a habit of finishing early, before the sun went down. A home where death was still fresh and only darkness loomed beyond the windows was a place of unrest, a blackbird's wretched caw on a lonely street. After nightfall those homes leaked a black dye from the floor into the body, where it would travel to the heart and grip firmly with an anxious hand.

House of Walls

I'd been alone for two weeks. Everything had become still and quiet. I heard no voices, I felt no footsteps. Dust began to collect around me. Just when I thought I would remain vacant, Venus returned.

Venus dropped her bags and suitcase in the entry way of Chateau Olympia. The 20-acre estate had been home to her and her father, Howard Rosendale, throughout her life. Her father had named the estate after a Manet painting entitled "Olympia" that depicted a nude model, strikingly similar to her mother, lying on a bed while a servant offered her a bouquet of flowers. Her father built the house when he married Venus' mother, Grace. Howard's inheritance from his family's manufacturing business had allowed him to put an extravagant amount of money into the project. Venus never considered any other place she lived to be home. She had lived in her last apartment for three years and had never been able to get a good night's sleep.

The light switch shocked her as she fumbled to find it. With the flip of the switch and a slight jolt, Venus looked into an entry way she'd been in a million times before. She glanced into the formal sitting room at the pictures of her family on the walls. The pictures had never been replaced or moved after they were displayed. To Venus, the wall hadn't changed at all. If she had tilted one of the frames she would have seen the original wallpaper color that had been protected from the sun coming in through the bay windows. The paper was harshly faded from a rich crimson to a pallid, burnt orange. The rectangles of paper that had been shielded from the sun behind the picture frames were the only proof of the paper's original vibrancy.

Venus slept in her father's bedroom that night. She tossed and turned, leaving her unrested and frazzled the next morning. She woke up a few hours after the sun rose with light glaring in her eyes from the windows. The house seemed different during the day. The lighting

her father had built into the house was very dim except for the hallways and his study, where he placed bright track lighting to illuminate his displayed collection of paintings. When the sun forced light through every window, the rooms transformed from dark chambers into livable spaces. Every room was graced with large windows except for Howard's study. The hexagon-shaped room was built in the very center of the house, adjoining the master bedroom. The small space had no natural light and was decorated sparsely. Venus toured the rooms in the house, including her old bedroom. She smiled when she saw the pink and blue lettering that spelled out her name above her bed. There was a large print of Edward Coley Burne-Jones' painting, "The Mirror of Venus" hanging on the opposite wall. Venus recalled all of the times her father had told her about her name.

"I named you after this painting, Venus. Do you see how beautiful she is? That's how beautiful your mother was and how beautiful you are. She's looking at her reflection in the pool, that's to remind you that you are a part of your mother and she is a part of you, no matter where she is."

Howard had never fully recovered from Grace's death. He had left her in the house to run an errand and returned to the ambulance's flashing lights in his driveway. Grace had gone into labor and had been unable to get to a phone before she began to hemorrhage. By the time the medics arrived, it was all they could do to deliver Venus. Her mother died in the living room floor just as Venus took her first arduous breath.

Venus walked over to her closet and opened the door. She pulled a poster of an old singing group off of the back wall and exposed a small print of Botticelli's painting, "The Birth of Venus." During her teenage years, Venus became obsessed with the painting and told people that she was named after it; she thought it was more explanatory of her situation than her father's

fairy tale of togetherness. She gazed at the small poster for a few moments and backed out of the room.

Although she had looked in every room and closet, Venus was unable to step into the study where her father had spent most of his time, and where he had died. Howard's gardener found him slumped over his desk on a Monday morning two weeks earlier. The coroner found that he had experienced an aneurism and died almost instantly. Venus made her way around the house, ignoring the door that led into the study as if it were invisible.

* * *

The rug on the floor felt worn and soft under Venus' feet. After taking a shower and dressing in slacks and a black blouse, she drove into the city to her father's art gallery. The red brick building had a wall of windows in the front and a small sign above the door that read, "FaDa." Howard had named the gallery after he and Venus, father and daughter. He had opened it ten years earlier, to promote local artists. It became a hot spot for socialites and the most popular venue for the area's artists. Neal Duvall oversaw much of the gallery's business. He had been a long time friend of Howard's and the Rosendale family.

"Ah, Ms. Venus Rosendale. Home again," Neal said softly as he embraced Venus in his thick arms.

"Yes, I'm not sure that it feels much like home without Dad."

"I know, this place hasn't been the same without him. I can't believe I miss him looking over my shoulder."

"He was awfully good at that," Venus said as she smiled and walked into the main room. There were several bright colored paintings of blenders and toasters displayed on the walls.

“That’s John Ovid’s latest collection. Your father got a kick out of his work. Thought it was ‘simplistically pleasing,’ or so he said.”

Venus gazed at the canvases for a moment more and walked toward the back office. Neal and Venus spent the day going over documents and business information. Venus had decided to run the gallery for a while until she figured out what else she wanted to do. She had completed her Master of Arts degree and had done a few shows of her own paintings. She liked the idea of dealing with other people’s work for the moment. She had not picked up a brush since she heard Neal’s voice through her receiver explaining about aneurisms and funeral arrangements.

The day had aged into evening by the time Neal and Venus locked the door and headed to the parking lot.

“Hey, I’ve got something for you,” Neal said as he opened the trunk of his car. “It’s not much, but I figured you could use it for something.”

Neal pulled four large canvasses and a cardboard box full of paints and brushes from the trunk and carried them to Venus’ car.

“Not much? Neal, you didn’t have to do that.”

“I want you to have everything you need. I’d love to display your work. I don’t know why you never let your father do it before.”

“I just didn’t want to get a show just because my dad was the owner. Plus, I haven’t been working any lately, I’ve had too much going on,” Venus said as she helped load the supplies.

“Well, now is your chance. Take a break and use it as a release. You’re still in shock over all of this and you shouldn’t push yourself.”

“Thanks Neal. I’ll be fine. I am fine.”

“Call me if you need anything. You know I’m here for you.”

“I know,” Venus whispered.

She held back the tears until she was a block away and then cried the rest of the drive home. By the time she pulled up the driveway she had convinced herself that she was just overwhelmed by the move and it would take a little time to feel better. She carried the supplies Neal had given her into the house. She opened the door to her father’s study and put the canvasses and box of paints just inside the doorway. Shutting the door quickly, she thought, “At least I don’t have to look at them if they’re in there.”

* * *

The evenings became repetitious. Venus read and watched television until midnight or later every night. She turned down many of Neal’s offers to eat with his family. Her listless evenings stretched into restless nights. Venus woke every morning even more fatigued than the last. She awoke one night during her second week at Chateau Olympia sitting upright in her bed, whimpering under her breath. When her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she realized where she was and fell silent aside from her rapid breathing. She got out of bed, put her robe on and walked to the kitchen. She made herself some coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. She stared hard at that wainscoted wall, trying to remember what she had been dreaming about. She searched her mind for any memory of the dream until a streak of red on the counter by the sink caught her eye. She walked over to the sink and examined the mark. It looked like blood at first, but it smelled like oil. She hadn’t noticed this imperfection when she arrived. She scrubbed the surface until it was reduced to a light pink stain. Venus sat up the rest of the night, afraid to go back to sleep.

The next day she told Neal about her lack of sleep over lunch.

“I had a friend who would sleep walk around the neighborhood. His wife had to get a key lock for the inside of every door. He never got outside again, but she would find him in the mornings curled up by the front door,” Neal said as he shoved a fork full of creamy pasta into his mouth.

“I didn’t sleep walk. I was crying or something. I woke myself up”

“Maybe you talk in your sleep too. You should record yourself while you’re sleeping.”

“That’s only going to prove I snore. I just wish I could remember what scared me so badly.”

“Who knows. Give it time kid, you’re still adjusting.”

Venus tried to believe Neal, but was still concerned. She went to the store that night to get a few groceries and some sleep aids. She had decided that if she couldn’t sleep, she’d make herself. While traveling up the office supply aisle, she noticed a small hand-held recorder. She laughed at the thought of Neal’s suggestion, but picked it up anyway. It had a setting that would begin recording whenever someone spoke into it. She could leave it on all night and it would only record loud sounds. She threw the recorder into her basket and headed toward the frozen food section.

That night, Venus ate a frozen feast with two capsules of Dozenall for dessert. She sat up and stared mindlessly at a home decorating channel until her eyes were too heavy to hold open. The next morning she woke up late, around ten to the sound of her radio. She opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, trying to remember how she’d gotten to bed the night before. The last thing she recalled was a flamboyant decorator on TV convincing a woman that her new pea green walls would be fabulous once all of the furniture was put into the room. She rolled over to look at the clock and saw the recorder that she had bought the night before on her nightstand.

She must have set it up before she went to bed. The record button was still pushed down. She picked it up and pushed stop and then rewind. The tape rewound for longer than she expected it to. She wondered if she'd chattered through out the night, filling the tape with nonsensical stories and statements.

She let the tape come to a stop and pushed play.

"I guess you're on," she heard her own voice say in a sleepy, slurred speech.

She heard the sheets rustle as she was covering up. The tape then skipped to the next sound she made. Venus could hear mumbling and movement. She could make out a few words like, "sitting here....dark....red and black." Then the sound of the side table lamp clicking on could be heard. Venus didn't remember getting up that night. She heard the bed squeaking and the bedroom door opening and then later, shutting again. Venus looked around the room, wondering if she had actually left her bed in the night. The tape then blared out a radio commercial.

"My alarm was going off," she thought as she stared at the gray and black recorder.

A song Venus barely knew came on the radio and she could hear herself humming along to it. Venus laughed as she realized she was singing in her sleep. The next song was a cheesy number by Boy George that Venus would have denied knowing the words to. But, to her dismay, she heard herself singing every word along with the gaudy musician. Just before the end of the song she stopped singing and moved the covers around. The taped stopped. Venus laughed to herself. She had expected more screaming or crying, not Boy George ballads. She must have woken up at the end of the song and turned the recorder off. She looked toward the closed door and questioned what she'd heard on the tape. Had she left the bedroom?

Venus took a shower and got dressed before she went into the kitchen. She looked at everything, expecting something to be out of place, as if a trespasser had come in the night before. She found nothing missing or moved. Eventually, she gave up her search and headed into town to help Neal with a new show they were putting together.

For the next few weeks, Venus tried to document her sleep with the recorder. She often mumbled in her sleep and almost every tape contained the sound of the bedroom door opening and closing. Finally, one night Venus decided to tie a string to the recorder and put it around her neck. She figured if she was sleepwalking, maybe she could tell what she was doing if the device recorded her wherever she went.

The next morning Venus knew she was not in bed before she opened her eyes. She felt the cold hard wood floor beneath her and opened her eyes slowly. She focused on the crack under the door to her father's study. She was lying in the hall, with her knees curled up to her chest. She sat up slowly and felt the weight of the recorder around her neck. Venus got up and walked into the bedroom and lay down on the bed. She rewound the tape and closed her eyes as she pushed play. She could make out the sound of movement and then the now familiar sound of the bedroom door opening. She heard footsteps and the sound of another door knob turning. The recorder picked up many minutes of faint scratching noises that Venus couldn't decipher. She then heard a door shut and a thud. Then, she heard her own voice.

“Daddy, I know you always thought I was good, but I wasn't. When I was twelve I broke your David statue and blamed it on Muffin. I just didn't want you to be mad.” Venus could hear her own voice breaking up into sobs. She had almost forgotten about blaming the cat for the damage.

“And then, when I was fifteen, I snuck out with Patti and went to a party across town. I drank wine coolers and swam naked in a pool. I never liked your famous cobbler recipe, it was too gooey. I tried to water your irises with Kool Aid because I thought they would turn red. I killed them all. I’m sorry, Daddy. I painted pieces in college that I knew you wouldn’t like and got mad when you said you did. I knew I would never be as good as you wanted me to be. Botecelli, Manet. Venus is just a name.”

Her voice trailed off and the tape ran quiet. Venus realized that must have been when she laid down in the hallway. She rewound the tape and listened to her juvenile confessions again while she leaned on her father’s pillows.

I was used to Howard’s low, steady snore. Venus interrupted the tranquility of the night with her nocturnal grieving. I knew everything she had done. I can still see the marks left in the wood on her window’s edge by the ladder she used to climb down when she snuck out. Now her tears had stained the floor where she left so many footprints when she was small.

* * *

“Do you have a video camera?” Venus asked Neal nonchalantly.

“Yeah, I know we do somewhere because I’ll never forget all of Katy’s recitals. I saw every one of her routines through the lens. I don’t think we’ve ever watched any of those tapes again.”

“Do you think I could borrow it?”

“Sure, you planning on making a movie?” Neal said as he picked up his coffee cup.

“Sort of. Uh, I was hoping to get some shots around the house I guess. I just thought it would be something to do.”

“Yeah, I’ll pick it up when I go home for lunch. Abby needs me to run her a prescription from the pharmacy.”

Venus drove home that evening with the camera case in her passenger seat. She glanced at it a few times, wondering if she was going crazy. When she got home, she set the camera up on the desk in her father’s bedroom. She pointed it toward the bed and adjusted its height with a few books until the bed was in the center of the screen. That night, Venus turned the camera on and left the bedside light on dim. She took two sleeping pills before closing her eyes.

The next morning she woke up and stared into the camera. She got up and made herself half a pot of coffee. She plugged the camera into the television in the living room and settled herself on the couch. She watched the tape, fast forwarding through most of it. The tape only lasted for three hours and captured nothing but her tossing and turning in bed. Venus was discouraged; she had expected something spectacular. She continued to video tape herself sleeping a few times a week. She even purchased a six hour tape so that she could record longer into the night. Finally, a few weeks later she got something. She was watching the tape as it fast forwarded until she saw herself make a sudden movement and sit up. Venus stopped the tape and ran it back a few seconds. She pushed play again and watched as she sat up in bed and dangled her feet over the side. Her eyes were closed and she was very still for a few minutes. She put her feet on the ground and walked toward the door. She opened it and stepped out into the hallway. Venus was amazed. She had no recollection of getting out of bed. She watched the tape until it ran out two hours later. She had never come back into the bedroom on the tape, where had she been for over two hours?

Venus felt a chill run up her spine. It was unsettling to know that she was not in control every second of everyday. She wanted to stop sleep walking. She wanted to stop taking the pills. She wanted what had died with her father, genuine relaxation and comfort.

* * *

“Thanks for letting me borrow this,” Venus said as she put the camera case down by Neal’s desk.

“Did you get what you wanted? Did it work alright? I dropped it in a pool once and it’s been a little off ever since.”

“It worked fine. Isn’t Dave Reynolds supposed to be coming in today to show us his latest pieces?”

“About that, he called this morning and said that he wasn’t satisfied with what he has and was wondering if he could wait until the next show.”

“What about the spaces, we need at least five more pieces,” Venus said as her forehead crinkled with stress lines.

“Why don’t you do them? Have you been working on anything new? Do you have anything old you want to display?” Neal asked with a hopeful tone.

“No, Neal. I haven’t done anything new; get that out of your head. We’ve got to find someone else soon or this show isn’t going to happen.”

“Well, I hate to make this worse on you, but Abby’s sister died last night and we’re going to have to fly to Nebraska for the funeral. We should be back by Thursday, but that’s the day before the show.”

“Oh no, I’m so sorry,” Venus said as her frustration melted into concern and empathy.

“I’ve made all of the catering arrangements and the show is set up except for those few empty spaces. As far as finding someone, I’ve got a few artists that are offering. All you have to do is make the decision.”

“Yes, of course. You go take care of Abby. She needs you. I can handle it; I’ve got almost a week.”

Venus contacted the two artists and set times to meet with them and look over their work. She hoped that she could find something that fit with the themes of the other pieces. Neal had obtained paintings by Adrian Bronson and Sharon Shannon, two local artists who painted fairly abstract images.

She spent the next few days meeting with different people, trying to find something to complete the show. Even though she had not confided in Neal about her sleep walking, she felt uncomfortable when he left. She missed his availability and willingness to help her. She was in such a frenzy about the event that she hardly had time to rest. On Wednesday night Venus still hadn’t found someone to fill the void in the show. Nothing she saw seemed to work. She paced the living room for a few hours making phone calls to old friends from art school, attempting to locate appropriate pieces. She finally gave up and decided to try to get some rest. For the first time in months, she fell asleep quickly.

* * *

Venus awoke the next morning still tired. She went over her action plan for the day before she ever opened her eyes. She finally convinced herself to sit up and look into the morning light. Screams exploded from her throat and hit the air with a piercing crash. Venus’ eyes scanned her arms and t-shirt. She began to feverishly wipe what looked like blood from her arms. She realized it was too dry to wipe away and pushed the bedspread back with her feet. Her

feet were also covered in red with splatters of the substance up her legs. Venus felt every inch of her skin for a wound, but found nothing. She smelled the dried, red goo, then licked it and realized she was covered in paint. She could dig her fingernail under it and flake off dried chunks. Venus leaned over and saw red footprints of paint coming through the door and toward the bed. She looked at her feet again and placed them onto the dried prints on the floor. She followed her own steps into the hallway and to the door of her father's study. The footsteps lead under the door and the doorknob was smeared in paint. Venus stared at the door as if it held the secret to life, or at least hers. She slowly opened the door and stepped into the room. She flipped the light switch and was bombarded by color that penetrated her vision with brute force. She stumbled back against the doorway and stared at the walls of the room. All of the canvasses Neal had given her were hanging on the walls, covered in paint and images. She focused on one painting of her father done in all blue tones. She recognized her own brush strokes.

“It looks like Dad was right here, posing for me.”

Venus put her hand over her open mouth as she walked around the room and really looked at her pieces for the first time. She had painted one of her father, one of her mother and two of the house and grounds. Just when her shock began to subside, she turned to the wall that connected the study and her father's bedroom. She saw a large, six foot by four foot mural that she had painted directly onto the wall. Venus gasped as she took in the images. There were two human figures painted in vibrant red and orange hues. They were joined at their backs and legs, as if becoming one. The backs of their heads were the only areas that had not united with each other. They were stretching their arms toward each other in such a way, you could almost visualize them merging into one. Below the figures was a pond of water that reflected them flawlessly.

* * *

The phone book fell to the table with a thud. Venus looked up the number to a local builder and dialed it into the phone. Two hours later there were work trucks parked in the driveway and men with sledgehammers and saws working in the study. Venus watched as the men cut the mural out of the wall. It took four of them to carry it out to the truck waiting outside. She surveyed the men as they busted the rest of the wall out, exposing the study's dark walls to the light from the bedroom windows.

"I can bring in some wood and create a threshold between these two rooms," the builder said as he put a large chunk of the wall into a trash can.

"No, that's okay. Just knock it all out and leave the floor like it is," Venus said as she put on her coat. "I'm following your guys down to the gallery to get this mural inside. I appreciate you doing this on such short notice."

"You know your Daddy and I were friends, I figure it's the least I can do. Just let me know when you want this floor repaired."

Venus unlocked the front door and held it open while the men hauled the thick piece of wall into the gallery. She had them place it in the middle of the main room with the mural facing the front door. The men built a base around the wall for support. She hung the rest of her pieces around the gallery, filling up the empty spaces, and stepped back to take it in. Venus was nervous but she knew it was right. Just then, the office phone rang.

"I've been trying to get a hold of you," Neal's voice proclaimed. "How did it go, did you decide on someone?"

"Yes I did; I think it will all be perfect," Venus said, twirling her hair around her fingers.

"Well, who is it? What pieces are you using?"

“It’s a surprise, Neal. I want you to experience it along with everyone else. Listen, I’ve got some work to do. Just stay at home with Abby and you guys can come to the show tomorrow night; everything is taken care of,” Venus said, eyeing her watch.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about a thing.”

* * *

By the time Venus returned home, the workers had cleaned out the study and left the property. She went into the garage where she had stored some of belongings that she had shipped from her old apartment. She pulled a large box out and dragged it inside. Once in the study area, she took an easel and some painting supplies out of the box. Venus set the easel up in the study where the sunlight from the bedroom windows fell in a thick golden ray. She put a fresh canvas on it and stepped back into the bedroom. She looked along the new opening in the wall. Getting down on her knees, she felt the rough edges of the floor where the wall had been.

It was a scar. The wall had been a wound that healed into the raw line along the now open floor. Venus opened my core and flooded it with light. The scar was simply a reminder that pure illumination can transform the darkest void.

A Stiff Jester

“86th and Market please,” I said as I slid into the back seat of a dirty yellow cab. I hadn’t been back to my parents’ home in Cleveland in over two years. I spent three years there after high school, studying theater costume and makeup design at the local campus. Then, I picked up and moved to New York with visions of Broadway in my head. Now, I know that make up design isn’t the most masculine career, but I considered it art. It was painting, just on human skin.

Once in New York I proceeded to flounder in and out of meaningless jobs and relationships while doing small theater gigs on the side. One day, after a performance, I was offered a job that paid three times what I was making by Mr. Cranston who owned the funeral home in my neighborhood. He had seen the play and thought that I had, “quite a knack for cosmetic enhancement,” or so he said. I wrestled with actually showing up for my training the following Monday. The fact that I’d be working on dead people didn’t really bother me. The fact that I didn’t mind was what scared me. Death had always seemed so eminent to me. Why should we fear what we cannot change?

This brings me to the reason I was traveling past my old high school on my way to my parents’ gated community. My mother’s uncle, Maury, had died of a heart attack and his funeral was going to be held the following day. My mother had been close to Maury, despite his eccentricities. After Maury’s wife died of cancer ten years before, he started spending all of his free time at the local hospital. Maury would dress up as a clown, call himself “Dr. Giggles” and do just about anything to get a smile out of the patients.

The cab came to a stop as I read the wooden sign my mother still had hanging from the mailbox that read, “Frank, Mary and Samuel Burke.” I paid the fare, took a deep breath, and walked toward the door. Before I could knock, the door opened and my mother greeted me with a hug.

“Sam, I’ve missed you so much! How was your flight? Are you hungry?”

“I’ve missed you too, Mom. The flight was fine,” I said as I walked into the entry-way.

“I’m not really hungry. Are you okay?”

“I’m better now that my boy is home,” she said as she squeezed my cheek.

“How’s Dad?”

“Oh, he’s fine. He’s out back, working on something in the garage.”

I walked into my old room to put my bag away. My mother was apparently trying her hand at interior decorating and had redone my room in bright yellow and orange hues. I think she was going for an earth tone look, but it reminded me of a Big Bird costume I worked on for *Sesame Street on Ice*. I put my bag down and headed outside. I walked quietly toward the garage and peered into the window. My father, Frank, was sitting with his back to me. I opened the door and he jumped up from his chair revealing the cigar he had in his hand as he whirled around.

“Oh, hey Sammy. How are ya, boy?”

“Good, Dad. What’s with the Cuban?”

“I just thought I’d come out here and relax a bit. Your mother has been driving me crazy with all of the funeral arrangements.”

I took a seat on an old lawn chair next to him as he passed me the cigar. “Have the girls been over here yet?” I asked, referring to my mother’s two sisters, Francie and Jane.

“Of course, they’ve been here all day; you just missed them. They had a bit of an uproar today,” he said as he retrieved his cigar from me.

“Oh yeah, what now?”

“Well, it turns out that Maury had made some kind of amendment to his will recently, requesting that he be buried in his clown costume.”

“What?”

“You know how he used to go up to the hospital? When he retired and moved to Florida two years ago, his volunteer work apparently became a priority. He always liked making people laugh.”

“Does he want everyone to laugh at his funeral?”

“I’m not sure, Sam. Francie and Jane seem to think that he’d gone senile during those last few years. They’re trying to figure out whether or not to have an open casket.”

“Maybe it would liven things up. I mean, funerals can be fun,” I said with a smirk.

“Son, you’ve been working with those stiffs too long. But, I won’t lie; I think it’s going to be interesting if nothing else.”

Dad put out his cigar in an ashtray and hid it on a shelf behind a box marked “X-mas.”

“Don’t tell your mother about me smoking, you know how she is.”

“Sure, Dad.”

* * *

The next morning I was dressed and eating breakfast by 10:00 a.m. The house was quiet. My mother had left a note saying that she was at Gretta’s Garden, the local florist shop, picking

out some arrangements. I thought about suggesting that she get some balloons, too, to go along with the clown motif. The front door opened just as I shoveled the last bit of the pancakes she had left for me into my mouth. I turned to the doorway and saw my mother, Francie and Jane. All were dressed in black attire except for Aunt Francie's bright red heels.

"Sam! I haven't seen you since Christmas three years ago!" Francie said as she reached to hug me. She smelled of bourbon.

"It's great to see you again, Sam. Do you have a girlfriend?" Jane probed.

"No, uh, work keeps me pretty busy you know."

"Well, maybe that work of yours is what's keeping the women away. You ever think of that?" Francie retorted. "Who wants to date someone who touches dead bodies all day?"

"Now Francie," my mother said. "Sam is a fine boy and it doesn't matter what he does for a living. Plus, he doesn't have to tell them what he does right off." She turned as she said, "You could go on a few dates with them before you drop the bomb, right?"

Just what I needed: dating advice from the Diablo sisters. My mother was the only one that was able to stay married to one man. Both Jane and Francie had been married multiple times and were now single. I just shook my head and took my plate to the sink.

"Did you hear about Maury's will, Sam?" Jane asked as she sat at the kitchen table.

"Yeah, Dad mentioned something about that last night."

"Well, his costume arrived with his body. It's absolutely incredible."

"It's bright orange with big blue polka dots all over it," said Mom. "They even sent the oversized stethoscope he wore around his neck."

"Hey, he's the only doctor in the family," I said. "Even if he is 'Dr. Giggles.'"

My mother shot me a look that made me feel as if I were fourteen again.

“We’re heading up to the funeral home soon. We’re still trying to decide on the open casket. I just don’t think it’s respectable to have him laid out in some kind of crazy get up,” Francie said as she poured liquid from her flask into a coffee mug.

“But that’s what he wanted, Francie,” Mom said. “We should respect his last wishes. Take it easy on the hooch. We already have one clown at this funeral, and Lord knows we don’t need you acting a fool.”

Francie ignored Mom’s warning as she tipped up her cup.

“Where’s Grandma Cici?” I asked.

“She’s at home. She’s been devastated by all of this. She didn’t even want to go to the funeral,” Jane said. “But I told her that he’s her brother and she has to pay her respects.

“We haven’t even told her about the whole clown suit thing. We figured she’d never come if she knew,” Mom said.

“So you’re just going to let her find out when she sees a big polka dot bow tie sticking out of the casket?” I asked with a chuckle.

“We’re going to bring her in before the funeral and tell her. I think once she’s there, she’ll be okay,” Mom said as she poured a cup of coffee.

“Well, she’s the least of our worries,” Francie said. “Mom’s other brother, Uncle Ed, insists on coming.”

I refrained from any comments at that point. Ed was a nice guy, but he didn’t get out much due to his Tourette’s Syndrome.

“I love Ed; he’s just hard to handle,” Mom said as she walked toward the hallway.

Mom was always trying to make up for her sisters by playing the peacemaker.

“Sam, we’re going to make sure everything is ready. Can you bring your father to the funeral home around eleven?”

“Sure,” I said.

I thought about asking her to make sure the plastic flower on his ruffled collar was full of water, in case he wanted to pull one last prank. I refrained due to the fact that my idea of humor was not exactly universal.

* * *

My father’s old Plymouth roared into the parking lot of Smith and Martin Funeral Home. We sat silently in the car together for a few moments before my father finally spoke, “Well, we’re here. Let the fun begin.”

I walked into the chapel and saw my mother straightening some of the arrangements around the open casket. Maury’s bright orange suit clashed with all of the red and white carnations in the spray on top of the casket. I thought that it was too bad they had the lower half of the casket closed –we all missed out on his oversized clown shoes.

“We decided to leave it open. But I wouldn’t let them paint his face the way he used to. He said in his will that he wanted his face to be painted. I just couldn’t do it,” Mom said as she patted Maury’s arm. “So I compromised and let them put this red foam nose on him.”

My eyes started to tear up from the explosion of laughter that I was holding in.

“Oh honey, don’t cry. He’s better off where he is now,” Mom said in a consoling voice that made it even harder not to laugh.

“Your Grandma will be here with Ed shortly. Try to keep Ed busy, okay? We don’t need to make this any worse than it already is,” she said as she peered back down at Maury’s pale face and bright red nose.

I turned toward the door and saw Pastor Randolph walk into the room. He approached us at the casket.

“Mary, it’s nice to see you again. I’m sorry it’s under these circumstances. It looks like they’ve done a really nice jo...,” he trailed off when he looked into the casket and saw Maury.

Mr. Randolph stared for a moment more, speechless, until my mother piped up. “I guess I didn’t mention that we were going ahead with the open casket. Maury would have wanted it that way.”

Mr. Randolph took a deep breath and said, “I have to tell you this Mary—this is the most unusual funeral I have ever spoken at. I hope I can do Maury justice.”

“I’m sure you will, Pastor. I understand that the circumstances aren’t exactly normal, but he was a beautiful person nonetheless.”

I turned to find a seat and saw my grandmother, Cici, walk in arm-in-arm with Ed. Cici had her usual funeral dress on. After a while we started to notice that she always wore the same dress to every funeral. Ed looked very nice in his blue blazer. I noticed that he still wore a bracelet on his wrist that explained his condition in case he ran into someone who wasn’t familiar with Tourette’s syndrome. I walked to meet them at the back of the chapel.

“Oh, Sammy! My grandbaby. You’re so grown up. I’m so glad you came.”

“I’ve missed you, Grandma.” I said, as I hugged her small frame. “I’m sorry about Maury.”

“I know you are, honey. The last few days have been trying, but I’ll be all right.”

she said, as she glanced up toward the coffin.

“It’s nice to see you, Ed. I heard you’ve been working for the city,” I said, trying to make conversation.

“Yes, yes, I read meters. Yes. Meters.” he said.

“Ed, how about we go pay our respects before everyone gets here; then we can just sit down and rest,” Grandma said.

I moved out of the aisle so that they could walk up to the front. I fell in behind them as they passed, not wanting to miss a moment. Ed started to mumble as they neared the coffin. Once they were close enough to see into it, Grandma stopped dead in her tracks. My mother stopped talking with Pastor Randolph and approached Grandma and Ed.

“Mom, we didn’t know how to tell you. Maury requested that he be buried in this, and we thought it was the right thing to do,” my mother said as carefully as she could.

Ed began to mutter louder. I could make out a few words like “dots” and “red nose.” Grandma Cici turned to my mother with her jaw dropped in astonishment. For a moment I thought she was going to faint, but she regained her composure and said, “Maury loved making people smile. He loved it more than himself...” She had a far-off look in her eyes for a second and then she smiled as she whispered, “I knew he was always eccentric, but I never thought he’d turn his own funeral into the fucking Big Top.”

My mother’s eyes widened and Pastor Randolph blushed and cleared his throat. I let a chuckle slip out just before Ed tried to speak, “I don’t know, I don’t know. He, he, Bozo! He looks Bozo! He looks peaceful, I guess.”

“Mother!” Mom said, completely ignoring Ed’s outburst. “I know this is hard on everyone, but get a hold of yourself. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier.”

“Well, I would have liked a bit of a warning, but I understand. Did he want streamers and horn blowers, too, or is this it?” Grandma asked.

“Of course not! He did want his face painted like a clown, but I thought that was too much, so we just put his nose on him.”

Then my grandmother said something I never thought she’d say---“If he wanted his face painted, we should do it. Sammy, do you think you could do it for us? I’m sure Smith and Martin wouldn’t mind. I mean you prepare bodies anyway, right?”

“I, I guess so. I mean, yes. They usually aren’t this, uh, festive,” I said.

“It’s settled then. Mary, you go tell the staff what we need to do, and we’ll postpone the funeral until Sammy can get Maury’s makeup done.” Grandma said, as she grabbed Ed’s arm and led him down the aisle.

I looked at my mother, hoping this was all a nightmare. I realized it wasn’t as she said, “Are you going to be able to do this?”

“I guess so. Don’t you have a picture of him with his makeup and costume on? I’ll need something to go by.”

My mother retrieved a framed snapshot from a table full of pictures on one of the side walls. I sat and stared at the photo until my mother returned with the owner of the funeral home.

“We can clear the chapel, and you can work on him right here, if you wish. I’ll have one of our men bring out the makeup,” said the somber man.

I just nodded.

So, there I was, just me and Uncle Maury. I looked at dead people everyday and still couldn’t grasp the whole situation. I tried to be quiet and respectful as I applied the first layer of

white paint. But, as I began to outline his eyes and mouth with bright reds and blues, I started talking to him.

“You know, Maury, I can’t say I’ve ever had the opportunity to give a clown his last face. I hope you like it.”

As I created a large red smile around his mouth, I couldn’t help but smile myself. I felt as if I were in the back of a theater preparing an actor for the final death scene in a twisted clown tragedy.

“If I can find the time, I might try to volunteer like you, Maury,” I said as I made broad strokes across his thick skin. When I finished, I replaced the red foam nose onto his and stepped back to compare my work with the picture. He looked exactly the same. I went out into the hallway where my family was waiting and informed them that I was finished.

* * *

I watched people file past the casket from my front row seat. Some people cried, but most smiled a little when they looked down into the casket. I wondered if that’s what Maury wanted, to create a few more smiles before his body was buried. Once everyone was seated, Pastor Randolph went to the podium.

“We are here today to both mourn and celebrate the passing of Maury Brachen. Maury’s good will and sweet nature will forever be missed by his friends and family. But we must celebrate his passing to a far better place...”

I wondered what that place was like. Was there a big clown Heaven in the sky where we could eternally joke and make people laugh? Perhaps he wasn’t gone at all. Maybe he was there in spirit, laughing at us all for being so rattled by his humor in death. Who knows.

Pastor Randolph spoke of Maury's life and accomplishments. It was strange watching someone try to give a serious sermon when the corpse couldn't even keep a straight face. Just as Pastor Randolph began a scripture about eternal rewards, Ed began to shift in his seat and mumble under his breath. Then, with a sudden burst of energy he began to yell, "He's gone. Shit. He's funny. Fuck. Funny dead clown!"

My mother placed her head in her hands out of frustration rather than grief. A few people gasped, while most who knew Ed from around town tried to ignore his outburst. It was nearly impossible for me to remain somber and respectful. I couldn't believe I was at a funeral surrounded by people who were trying to overlook the facts that the corpse looked like Bozo's brother and that Ed was spewing out every obscenity known to man. Even after the funeral director escorted Ed into an adjacent room, I could still hear his voice bouncing up and down in uncontrollable excitement.

By the end of the funeral I had a huge smile plastered across my face, and I didn't care if anyone thought it was disrespectful. It was what Maury wanted. In fact, his final antics have made me smile quite a few times since then. Maury's funeral was the only time in my life when the art and humor of theater intertwined with the tragedy of death to create a scene I knew I'd never see on any stage.

Improvisation

Gloria knew better than to have sex with John while her Grandmother was home, but she just couldn't help herself.

"We have to be quiet, Gran is in the living room watching 'Wheel of Fortune.' Do you hear me?" Gloria whispered as she closed the library door.

John looked at Gloria with sad eyes, "Yes, I know. You don't have to worry about me, it's you that makes all of the noise!"

As John proceeded to strip Gloria down to her skimpiers, Gran was making her way toward the library. Gran walked slowly because she was nearly blind and needed the wall to aid her onward.

"Do you hear something?" asked Gloria.

John didn't answer, he was too busy wrestling with the clasp on her bra. Just as he won his war with the undergarment, the door opened. There stood Gran, squinting to make out the shapes she sensed across the room. John motioned to Gloria, they both froze.

"Who's there? Gloria? I thought you said you were taking a nap? Is that you?"

Gran began to hobble closer to the half naked couple. John quickly pulled his pants on as Gloria slid her skirt back up and reached for her shirt on the desk in front of them.

"Yes, it's me Gran," Gloria answered, attempting complete innocence while slipping her arms into her sleeves and closing her shirt over her bare chest.

"What's going on, who's that with you?"

Gloria winced as she looked at John.

"This is Roberto, the new pool boy."

Gloria glared at John, nervously anticipating his response.

“Hello Meesis Landers. I be working on your pool these summer. Choo know, it’s going to be a hot one!” John blurted out in the most asinine attempt at a Hispanic accent ever created.

Gloria shot John a glance that said, “I can’t believe you just tried to pass yourself off as Cheech to my Gran!”

Gran gazed uselessly toward the two as she said, “Well, I hope it won’t be too rough out there. We appreciate your help.”

“Thas nice Meesis Landers. I’ll see choo later man!”

With that, John rushed out of the room, attempting to walk fast enough that Gran wouldn’t be able to focus in on and recognize his familiar face. Once the door was closed Gran asked, “Gloria honey, have you seen John?”

“No, not since last night. Why do you ask?”

“Well, your sister had a fight with him last night and apparently he left and she hasn’t seen him since.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Gloria said with a slight grin on her face. “I knew she shouldn’t have married that bastard.”

A Stiff Jester: A Play

1. Sam Burke
2. Mary Burke- mother
3. Maury Brachen- Mary's uncle (also plays Mr. Cranston)
4. Patient (female)
5. Jane- Mary's sister
6. Francie- Mary's sister
7. Pastor Randolph
8. Grandma Cici
9. Uncle Ed- Cici's brother
10. Mr. Sullivan- Funeral Director

Scene 1: Sam returns home for Maury's funeral.

Sam's mother lives in a small Southern town. Sam feels nostalgic about being home because it has been almost two years. Mary's home is well-kept, and inviting. Sam enters through a door into the kitchen, where Francie and Mary are waiting for him. Both are seated at the table (which is the coffin), before Sam enters.

Francie is relaxed and finds a bit of humor in the whole situation, while Mary is very loving but tends to be a control freak and is constantly concerned with others over herself.

Sam knocks at the door, Mary jumps to answer

Mary: Oh Sam! Oh my baby! Francie, look Sammy's home!

Mary grabs Sam in a bear hug; she is overly excited and nearly squeezes the breath from him.

Sam: Hi, Mom. It's good to be home.

Francie: Well, Sam looks like you made it in one piece.

Francie rises and slaps Sam on the back.

Sam: I suppose, I left a few pieces of myself in a barf bag on the plane, but other than that I'm all here.

Mary: Oh no! Well, you must be hungry then. I've got pot roast and mashed potatoes, or I've even got one of those frozen pizzas you used to like. Sit down, let me make you something.

Sam: Mom, it's already late, and I'm not really hungry...

Mary: I have banana pudding, summer sausage, what about a hamburger, that wouldn't take too long...

Sam: Mom, I said I'm not hungry.

Francie: Let the boy alone, he said he's not hungry. Jesus Mary, we'd all look like beached whales if we ate every time you offered.

Mary: What about some fruit or candy or popcorn, let me feed you, you look so thin.

Sam: Really Mom, I'm fine. I'll have an appetite in the morning.

Francie: Yep, you better fill up before the circus comes to town.

Mary: Francie! If you don't stop that I just don't know what I'll do!

Sam: The circus? Are we working that in after Maury's funeral?

Francie: Something like that.

Mary: Oh, Fran would you stop, it's not funny.

Francie: Clowns are always funny, sis.

Sam: Not necessarily, I read a book about this clown that lives in the sewers...

Mary: We're not talking about a "clown" anyway, it's just a costume.

Sam: A clown costume for who?

Francie: Wait for it...

Mary: For Maury.

Sam: Maury? You're going to put a clown suit on the corpse?

Mary: WE aren't doing it. Maury did it. In his will, he asked for it.

Mary hands Sam the will, pointing out Maury's request to be buried in a clown costume.

Sam: Why?

Francie: Because he was a loon!

Mary: You both know that's not true! He was just eccentric. When he retired he started going to hospital wards and performing his Dr. Giggles routine.

Sam: Like he used to do when one of us got sick? I loved that!

Mary: Remember, you and your cousins all got the chicken pox and he came over to entertain you?

Sam: I remember *Jill and Jeff* had the chicken pox and *you* dropped me off at their house for a couple days until I had it too!

Mary: You had to get them sometime.

Sam: But I do remember Maury, he made us balloon animals and sang songs. He was dressed in that get up; it was like having a life-size cartoon in the middle of the living room.

Mary: Well, that's what he did at the hospitals, made quite a name for himself among the patients and doctors. Some of the doctors at the children's hospital would wear red, foam noses every Monday when Maury would come.

Sam: So, he wants to be buried as "Dr. Giggles"?

Francie: (*sarcastic tone*) Makes sense, huh?

Mary: Hush! That's what made him happy. He didn't have any kids, he was retired, it was important to him. I don't care what you think or what the rest of the family thinks.

Sam: (*laughing*) I think it's great, Mom. Did he want the whole family to ride in one little car to the funeral too?

Mary: You guys are terrible! Can't a man be buried in peace?

Francie: Only if his shoes fit in the casket!

Mary: Francie!

Sam: It's like a funeral party. We could have cupcakes and pin-the-tail on the mortician.

Mary: You are both hopeless! We all have to go, and I'll be damned if I let anyone put either one of you into the ground before your last wishes are carried out. I had hoped you'd do the same for me, but now I'm not so sure!

Mary storms off stage.

Francie: Well, it depends on whether or not she wants to be buried in a Halloween costume or not. If she moves to crazytown and decides she wants to be laid to rest as the tooth fairy, you might want to think twice about carrying out her wishes.

Sam: You think she'll stay mad?

Francie: She'll be fine, she's just stressed out. She's been taking care of most of the arrangements. Why? Are you worried you won't get any breakfast in the morning?

Sam: Kinda.

Francie: You know she can't resist fattening you up. Listen, I'm going to head home. I'll see you in the morning.

Sam: I'll be there with bells on.

Francie: So will Maury.

Sam hugs his Francie, then she exits the stage. Sam carries his suitcase to the side of the stage where his bed is placed. Lights dim on kitchen area. Lights come up on the side of the stage where Sam is falling asleep. The coffin should be revealed by lighting. The only two images on stage should be Sam sleeping and the casket, the rest of the stage is black.

Scene 2: Dream Sequence

Maury opens the casket and steps out onto the stage (middle). Maury is wearing his clown costume (blue with orange polka dots) but his face looks dead and dark. As the stage lights come up, we see a woman in a wheel chair or hospital bed, on the opposite side of the stage from Sam. She is wearing a hospital gown and looks very sick. Maury, in full clown attire and death makeup steps over to the woman.

Maury: Well, hello little lady, is there anything I can do for you today? Would you like to hear a joke?

Patient: I've got one for you.

Maury: OK, give it to me.

Patient: How many doctors does it take to tell me I'm dying?

Maury: Well, none I guess. We're all dying! All of the time! *(Chuckles and dances about, fake strangles himself and prat falls onto the floor)*

The woman can't help but be amused by Maury's dancing and demeanor, she begins to laugh.

Patient: I suppose you're right. Do you have any of those balloons left?

Maury: I'd just be a strange man in a polka dot suit with out them, wouldn't I?

Maury pulls out a long, thin balloon

What would you like, a dog, a flower, snakes are the hardest!

Maury blows air into the balloon.

Patient: Can you make it look like God?

Maury lets the balloon go into the air, the lights dim and he moves slowly toward Sam, who has been watching from his bed. The patient fades out in the darkness and light is only cast on the side of the stage where Maury and Sam are located.

Maury: And what about you, Sam? Do you want to see God too?

Sam: I don't know.

Maury: Neither do I, but I do know that you have to stick up for me. Don't let them bury me in some boring suit. I wanna go out with a bang!

Sam: Uhh...

Lights come up on the coffin and Maury begins to walk toward it.

Maury: You hear me boy? I took you to the zoo. I bought you that transformer set you wanted. I was the one you came to after your Daddy died, remember? Don't you let them change me. This is what I want. What I am! (*Lies in the casket*). I won't rest, you hear me? I won't rest!
(*Maury honks a horn hanging from his side.*)

While Maury delivers these last few lines, Sam drops his head and falls back asleep. Once Maury has closed the lid of the casket Sam awakens abruptly and sits straight up in bed. Lights fade. End Scene.

Scene 3: Kitchen (the next morning)

The scene opens on Sam entering the empty kitchen. Sam gets a bowl of cereal and sits down at the coffin. The lower half of the coffin is down, providing a table for Sam. He eats a couple bites and looks around for a sugar jar.

Maury's arm rises from the casket and hands Sam the sugar jar. Sam takes it and sprinkles it on his cereal as if nothing has happened.

Mary and her two sisters, Francie and Jane enter from the driveway.

Sam: Well, hello ladies! Where have you been?

Mary: At the florists, picking out some last-minute arrangements.

Sam: Did you pick up balloons too?

Mary: Sam!

Francie: That'd be a nice touch.

Mary: Francie!

Jane: Sam! I haven't seen you since Christmas two years ago! How are you?

Sam stands and hugs Francie and Jane

Sam: Aunt Jane! I know, I can't believe it's been that long. I guess I've been staying pretty busy.

Francie: Too busy to get a girlfriend?

Sam: Well, work is taking up most of my time right now.

Francie: Maybe it's that work of yours that's keeping the women away. You ever think of that? Who wants to date someone who touches dead bodies all day?

Francie gets a cup of coffee while she talks and pours the contents of a flask from her purse into the coffee mug. She places the empty flask on the kitchen table.

Mary: Now Francie, Sam's a fine boy. It doesn't matter what he does for a living.

Sam: Yeah, Francie. It doesn't matter what I do.

Mary: No, but you could wait for a few dates before you drop the bomb, right Sam?

Sam shakes his head and puts his bowl on the counter.

Jane: Did you hear about Maury's will, Sam?

Sam: Yeah, Aunt Jane. Mom and Francie told me last night.

Jane: Well, his costume arrived with his body, it's absolutely incredible!

Francie: It's bright orange with big blue polka dots all over it!

Sam: How are you ever going to find flowers to match? I'm telling you, balloons and confetti are the way to go.

Mary: I see you still think you're funny. We're heading up to the funeral home soon. We've got to decide whether to have the casket open or not.

Jane: I just don't think it's respectable to have him laid out in some kind of crazy get up.

Francie: *(finishing off her cup of "coffee" and making another one with a second flask from her purse)* Hell, why don't we suspend him from a high wire and make a real spectacle out of it!

Mary: Francie!

Francie: Well, he wanted it to be fun, right? Why don't we just bring the fucking circus to town for God's sake?

Mary: Francie, we will do what Maury wanted, because we loved him. And you better ease up on the hooch. We already have one clown at this funeral; Lord knows we don't need you acting a fool!

Francie ignores Mary and continues to sip her drink.

Jane: You know her; she'll make an ass out of herself no matter what we do.

Francie: Fuck you, Janey.

Jane: Likewise, Sis.

Mary: OK, OK, OK! Enough.
(Sam laughs at this fight among the sisters)
Sam, this is not funny.

Sam: You're right, sorry. *(Trying to hold back his laughter)* Where's Grandma Cici?

Jane: She's still at home. She wasn't even going to go to the funeral.

Sam: Why?

Mary: She and Maury were close. Maury was the baby of the family, your Grandma practically raised him while their parents worked the farm; she's completely distraught.

Francie: *(laughing)* She doesn't even know about the clown thing! Apparently, your mother wants it to be a surprise! Too bad it's not her birthday.

Mary: No, I just didn't know how to tell her. I thought if I did she'd never come. It was hard enough to get her to agree to come in the first place.

Sam: So you're just going to let her find out when she sees a big, polka dot bow tie sticking out of the casket?

Mary: We're going to bring her in before the funeral and tell her. I think once she's there, she'll be OK.

Francie: She's the least of our worries, Uncle Ed insists on coming.

Jane: He's their brother, Francie!

Mary: I love Ed, he's just hard to handle. Listen, Sam. We're going to make sure everything is ready at the funeral home. Can you drive down around eleven?

Sam: Sure, no problem.

Mary: Come on, girls. Let's get a move on. Francie, don't you bring that cup.

Francie: It's just coffee.

Jane: You could wake the dead with that liquor breath.
(Women rise and head toward the door)

Francie: Well, let me have another cup or two and let's see if we can't turn this whole thing around. Maury can put on a little show and we'll all go home happy.

Mary: Hush! Let's go. Bye Sam!

The sisters exit the stage while telling Sam goodbye. Sam moves to the center of the stage and addresses the audience.

Sam: Maybe I should remind them to put a fake plastic flower that shoots water on his lapel, in case he wants to pull one last prank! Maybe not. My sense of humor isn't exactly universal.

Ah, the Diablo sisters. My mother always plays the peacemaker while Francie and Jane fight it out. It's always the same: Mom gets her feelings hurt, Jane gets mad and Francie gets drunk.

Makes me glad to be an only child.

That's one of the reasons I don't come home often, that and my job. My job... I started working in the city after I studied costume and makeup design. Wanted to do design for Broadway. That didn't exactly work out. I had done one stint with Sesame One Ice and a few shows for a small theater when I was approached by Mr. Cranston (*motions toward Maury*). He owned the local funeral home in my neighborhood.

During Sam's last few lines, Maury gets out of the coffin and pulls a hat and jacket out with him. He puts them on over his clown costume.

Sam cont.: He said I had:

Maury/Mr. Cranston: Quite a knack for cosmetic enhancement! You know, you should work at my funeral home, the dead need rouge too! (*Motions to his own hollow cheeks*)

Sam: I wasn't convinced.

Maury/Cranston: You'd make twice as much as you do here.

Sam: I was convinced.

Maury/Cranston exit stage

Sam cont.: So, I went to the training session. The fact that I would be working on dead people didn't really bother me, it was the fact that I didn't mind that frightened me. Death had always seemed so eminent to me... why should we fear what we cannot change? Case in point, Maury.

Maury always lived life to the fullest. He helped Mom out a lot after my father, Howard died when I was seven. He wasn't necessarily a father figure, but he was always willing to lend a hand when Mom needed it. Mom and I made it fine without Dad. She never remarried or even dated though. She kind of died with him to a certain extent. And I, well I just grew up without a father. But that's neither here nor there. Today is about Maury.

Sam exits stage

Scene 4: Funeral Home

The funeral is being held at Smith and Martin Funeral Home. The coffin is located at center, back stage. There are rows of chairs on either side of the coffin, facing each other. When the lights come up Mary, Francie and Jane are already in the chapel, putting up pictures and

arranging flowers. Maury is in the casket in his clown costume and a red-foam nose (wearing death make-up). Sam enters from the side.

Mary: I just don't think it's right, Francie!

Francie: That's what he wanted; you might as well do it.

Jane: Francie!

Sam: What's wrong, Mom?

Mary: We decided to leave the casket open, but I will not have them paint his face up.

Francie: He asked for it- specifically!

Mary: It will scare all of the kids in the family!

Sam: I thought kids love clowns.
(Francie laughs at Sam's comment)

Mary: You're not helping.

Sam: *(walking to the casket)* Looks like you're half way there with this nose.

Francie drunkenly decides to sit in one of the front row chairs after she backs into it laughing and nearly falls.

Jane: Oh, Francie! Really! The last time you got like this you showed the entire Boone County Bridge Club that horrible tattoo on your rear.

Francie: It's not horrible, it's a butterfly.

Jane: Well, it looks like it already hit the windshield and smeared under the wipers!

Mary: Girls! We are at a funeral!

Francie: It hasn't started yet, the midgets aren't here.

Mary: That's it, Francie. You just sit there and hush. I don't want to hear another word from you. Sam, Grandma Cici will be here soon with Ed. Try to keep him busy, OK? We don't need to make this worse than it already is. *Mary peers at Maury's coffin.*

Pastor Randolph enters with his Bible in hand.

Randolph: Mary, it's nice to see you again. I'm sorry it's under these circumstances. It looks like they've done a really nice jo...

Randolph's voice trails off as he looks into the casket.

Mary: I guess I didn't mention that we're going ahead with the open casket.

Randolph: I have to tell you Mary, this is the most unusual funeral I have ever spoken at. I just hope that I can do Maury justice.

Mary: I'm sure you will, Pastor.

Grandma Cici and Uncle Ed enter the chapel. Grandma Cici is in a simple, black dress and wearing glasses and Ed is wearing slightly out-of-date clothing and has a wrist band on that explains his condition: Tourette's Syndrome. Sam walks to meet them at the side of the stage. Mary and Jane look concerned about how Cici will take the clown costume. Jane takes a seat next to Francie. Francie turns in her seat for a better view with a smile on her face.

Cici: Oh, Sammy! You're so grown up. I'm so glad you came.
Sam and Cici hug.

Sam: I've missed you. I'm so sorry about Maury.

Cici: I know, honey. The last few days have been hard, but I'll be OK.
Cici glances toward the coffin, squints and adjusts her glasses, she cannot see all the way to the casket.

Sam: It's nice to see you again, Ed. I heard you've been working for the city.

Ed: Yes, yes. I read meters. Yes. Meters.

Cici: Ed, how about we go pay our respects now, before everyone gets here; then we can just sit down and rest.

*Sam moves out of their way and falls in behind them with a smirk on his face.
Ed begins to mutter softly as they approach the coffin.
Mary steps between Cici and the coffin.*

Mary: Mom, we didn't know how to tell you. Maury asked that he be buried in this, and we thought it was the right thing to do.

*Ed begins to mutter louder, some words like "dot" and "red nose" can be heard.
Cici looks at Mary with astonishment, for a moment she seems to be close to fainting but she regains her composure.*

Cici: Maury loved making people smile. He loved it more than himself...
(Nearly a whisper) I always knew he was eccentric, but I never knew he'd turn his own funeral into the fucking Big Top!

*Mary's eyes widen in shock.
Pastor Randolph blushes and clears his throat.
Sam let's a laugh slip out.*

Ed: I don't know, I don't know. He, he, Bozo! He looks Bozo! He looks peaceful, I guess.
Francie bursts into laughter and Jane smacks her on the leg.

Mary: *(completely ignores Ed's outburst)* Mother!

Cici: Well, I would have liked some warning, dear. Now, did he want streamers and horn blowers, too? Or is this it?

Mary: Of course not! But...he did want his face painted. I just thought that was too much, so we put this nose on him instead.

Cici: If he wanted his face painted, we'll do it. Sammy, can you do his makeup for us? I'm sure the funeral home won't mind, I mean you're certified to do this right?

Ed: Sammy does make-up. He's a girl! No, no, sorry. Make up is for girls!

Sam: *(ignoring Ed)* I guess so, I mean- I haven't done anything this festive since I worked off Broadway.

Cici: It's settled then. Mary, you go tell that fancy funeral director, Pat Sullivan, what we need and we'll hold the crowd until it's done.

Ed: Pat Sullivan. Pat's a girl too! Pat!

Sam: Gay, he's gay grandma, not "fancy."

Cici: Well, whatever.

*Cici takes a seat next to Francie.
Sam looks at Mary.*

Mary: Are you going to be able to do this?

Sam: Yeah, but don't you have a picture of him with his makeup and costume on? It'd be nice to have something to go by.

Mary retrieves a framed snapshot from a nearby table and hands it to Sam.

Mary: I'll go talk to Mr. Sullivan.

*Mary begins to exit. Ed continues to mumble uncontrollably.
Cici, Francie and Jane talk together.*

Sam studies the snapshot.

Jane: I took it last year at the Children's Hospital Fundraiser. Maury made me go with him. You know how I hate sick people.

Just as Mary exits the chapel she corrects Jane.

Mary: Being around them, you hate being around sick people.

Jane: Ok, Mary. Sure.

*Sam is deep in thought and does not appear to be listening.
Mary returns with the funeral director, Mr. Sullivan.
Mr. Sullivan speaks to Sam.*

Mr. Sullivan: Hello, Sam. I haven't seen you in forever. How are you?

Sam: Alright, I suppose. And you?

Mr. Sullivan: Oh you know, gaining weight, losing hair, still listening to disco and getting manis and pedis every Saturday. It's about the only excitement to be found around here.

Sam: Sounds like you're up the same old tricks.

Mr. Sullivan: I've still got a few new ones under my sleeve. Well, let's see, we can clear the chapel, and you can work on him right here if you wish. I'll bring out some make-up; I think we have what you need.

*Sam nods to Mr. Sullivan.
Mr. Sullivan ushers the family off stage.
Sam sits in a chair in the front row, still looking at the photograph in his hand.
Mr. Sullivan returns with a tray of paints, sponges and brushes. He places them in a chair next to Sam.*

Mr. Sullivan: It's good to see you again. It's been too long.

Sam: I know, it's good to see you too. The city keeps me busy.

*Mr. Sullivan exits.
Sam remains still.
Maury speaks from the casket without moving or opening his eyes.*

Maury: You ready for this, kid?

Sam looks up at the casket.

Maury: Can't ya hear me, boy?

Sam stands and approaches the casket.

Sam looks frustrated, rolls his eyes and leans down near Maury. He whispers:

Sam: Maury? I can't believe I'm doing this. Maury, can you hear me?

Maury sits up quickly and Sam screams and stumbles back a few steps. Sam puts his hand over his mouth to stop himself from screaming.

Maury: Of course I can hear you, I'm like Santa Claus now, I always know what you're up to!

Sam: (*surprised*) Really?

Maury: Of course not! Don't you think the dead have better things to do than spy on the living?

Maury climbs out of the coffin and removes his red, foam nose.

Maury cont.: So, what do you think? Can you give me one last face?

Sam: Uh, yeah. Here, let me see.

Sam picks up the paints from the chair.

Maury stands center stage, directly in front of the coffin.

Sam: So what *do* you do? Now, I mean.

Maury closes his eyes and Sam begins to apply a white base paint all over Maury's face.

Maury: It's really not that different from life.

Sam: Seriously?

Maury: Of course I'm not serious! What would be the point of death if it were the same as life? Don't ask stupid questions.

Sam: So, you fly around all day and eat clouds or what?

Maury: Jesus, Sammy. Use your brain. We don't eat the clouds, we never get hungry!

Sam: Come on, Maury. Tell me what it's like.

Sam begins to apply blue paint around Maury's eyes.

Maury: It's pretty much different for everyone, Sammy. I suppose it's the same as life in that respect.

Sam: Are you happy?

Maury: At times, it's a place of understanding. You have to understand pain and hatred before you can fully experience love and happiness.

Sam: So you feel pain?

Maury raises his arms out straight from his sides, parallel with the ground.

Maury: Not exactly, they're all kind of the same feeling now: pain, love, anger, comfort.

Sam begins to apply red paint around Maury's mouth.

Sam: Do you miss being here?

Maury: Of course, but once you've gotten what you came for, there's no need to stay.

Sam: What did you come here for?

Maury: Joy, laughter, family, cold beer. We all need different experiences. My prom night, in the back of Joleen Jenkin's father's Buick, now that was something I couldn't have left without.

Sam: Are there others where you are?

Maury: Of course, Sammy. But be honest- you want to know if your Daddy's here, don't you?

Sam: No, it was just a question.

Maury: Well, he is.

Sam: Really? Have you talked to him?

Maury: More or less.

Sam: What does that mean?

Maury: Talkin's for the living. I can feel him though.

Sam: I can't.

Maury: Yes you can, Sam. You just have to be able to recognize him.

Sam: How can I? I never really knew him.

Maury: You're a part of him, that should be enough.

Sam: I'm not like he was.

Maury: Sure you are, you gotta look past the surface.

Sam: No one else does.

Maury: They will. Give them time.

Sam: Almost done.

*Sam finishes up Maury's makeup and puts the red foam nose back on.
Sam backs away a few steps.*

Maury: *(with his arms out and a broad grin on his face)* Well, how do I look?

Sam: *(in a dull tone)* Hysterical.

Maury: Perfect!

Maury drops his arms back down to his side and begins to walk back toward the coffin.

Sam: So, this is it?

Maury: Sure is, Sammy. Thanks for the help. I just couldn't imagine being buried in some suit that made me look like a dentist or a tax attorney. There's no reason to be so serious. I mean, why fret over one little life? After seeing the great beyond- my hunch was right, there's no need to worry.

Sam: What if you're not perfect? I never go to church anymore...and I've had a stack of porn under my bed since I was twelve.

Maury: *(getting into the casket)* Didn't we all. I think you're OK. But I'll put in a good word for you just in case. One of the big guys out there owes me a favor; he had me do this thing for him. It's a long story.

Sam: Maury, what's the point of all of this? Life?

Maury: You need to stop talking to corpses and figure that out for yourself. Some people never do, so you gotta make *the big effort*, OK? Always do what *you* want, Sam. That way, you'll never regret any of it.

Sam: But, what if I make a mistake?

Maury: Don't worry, you will. But when you do, you'll be able to figure out how to fix things. Now, don't let this funeral get too sad, be sure and put Ed near the front. I've been waiting to see this one for years!

Maury lies down and closes his eyes.

Sam: Maury! Maury.

*Sam stares at Maury for a moment and then exits the stage.
Lights fade.*

Scene 5: Funeral

The lights come up on the funeral. Pastor Randolph is standing near the casket. Grandma Cici and Uncle Ed are seated in the row to the left of the coffin.

Sam enters with Mary. They stop in front of the coffin. Mary cries quietly and pats Maury's arm. Mary sits in the row to the right of the coffin and Sam sits next to Grandma Cici in the row on the left in the seat closest to the audience.

Jane and Francie enter and walk to the coffin. Jane is quite serious, but Francie breaks into giggles and Jane has to help Francie to her seat. They sit in the row on the right side of the stage, on either side of Mary.

Francie: (*whispering loudly*) Did you ever think you'd see a corpse that was happy to be at its own funeral? He looks like he's about to start juggling. (*Laughs*)

Mary: Hush!

Randolph: We are here today to remember Maury Brachen. Maury's goodwill and sweet nature will forever be missed by his friends and family. But we must celebrate his life and...

Randolph's voice trails off, while still mouthing the words to his eulogy.

Sam turns toward the audience and begins to speak while the rest of the funeral attendees focus on Randolph, as if Sam is not speaking.

Sam: This is the most bizarre thing I've ever seen... look at Pastor Randolph sharing tidbits about Maury's life and accomplishments. It's strange watching someone try to give a serious sermon when the corpse can't even keep a straight face.

Maury leans up, looks toward the audience, smiles broadly and lies back down with his eyes closed.

Maury speaks without moving or opening his eyes.

Maury: And we have Meltdown in 3, 2, 1...

Ed begins to mutter and shift in his seat.

Randolph: James 2:14 asks us, “What is the use of saying that you have faith if you aren’t proving it by helping others? Will *that* kind of faith save anyone?”

Ed: (*interrupting and yelling louder with each word*) He’s gone. Shit. Toaster! Sorry. He’s funny. Fuck! Funny dead clown!

Mary places her head in her hands out of frustration.

Francie falls onto Mary laughing.

Cici tries to calm Ed.

Sam laughs quietly and looks around at his family, the coffin and the audience.

Pastor Randolph attempts to repeat the verse from the beginning once Ed calms down.

Randolph: “What’s the use of saying that you have faith if you aren’t proving it by helping others? Will *that* kind of faith save anyone?” Every time Maury donned this costume he proved that he had faith in laughter and compassion. The verse continues, “so you see, it isn’t enough just to have faith. You must also do good to prove that you have it. Faith that doesn’t show itself by good works is no faith at all- it is dead and useless.”

Ed: I just, dead! I just. Fuck! I’m sorry. Let’s bury Bozo! How do his shoes fit in the box? Shit!

Pastor Randolph loses his composure, laughs and tries to cover it up with a cough.

Mr. Sullivan enters and walks to Ed. He leads Ed off stage while Ed chatters the whole way. The last of Ed’s lines can be heard from off stage (outside the chapel).

Ed: The flowers were nice. Dead clown! Dead clown! It’s not funny, but it is. Shit! I’m sorry.

Pastor Randolph starts to speak again and his voice fades out while his lips still mime the closing of his sermon.

Sam: Good deeds. I wonder what the world would be like if we all committed random good deeds. And were Maury’s deeds done more for himself or others? Who knows, it might not even make a difference. Look...

(Sam motions toward his Grandma Cici.)

Pastor Randolph bows his head and the rest of the characters, except for Sam, follow. Randolph begins to mouth the words to a prayer.

Sam Cont: She knew him best, and there are no tears...just...wait...

(Grandma Cici raises her head and begins to smile)

There! That’s it. That’s all he really wanted.

A smile...no sadness.

No ending...only a beginning...for everyone.

Sam turns back toward Pastor Randolph and lowers his head as he finishes the prayer.

Randolph: ... and thank you for blessing us with such a humorous and compassionate soul.

All Together: Amen.

Everyone looks up and the lights dim.

The Dead End